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CRACK
DETECTIVE
STORIES
NOV.
2 COMPLETE NOVELS
BLONDE BAIT FOR THE MURDER MASTER
by John D. MacDonald
STRANGE MAN, STRANGE MURDER
by Bruno Fischer
A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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DETECTIVE STORIES

★ IN THIS ISSUE WE PRESENT ★

Two Complete Feature Novels

Short Stories

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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STRANGE MAN, STRANGE MURDER

A Sinister Novel of Terror at Midday

By BRUNO FISCHER

(Author of "Death Paints A Picture)



Rose Decker wouldn't be having any more visitors . .



In the dead heat of summer it was cold in Rexton when the sinister man came walking up the street to call on women who lived there—but not for long—not for long after he paid them a visit!

NOBODY in Rexton saw the stranger arrive. He didn't get off the 3:18 train from Springfield, and it was certain that he didn't come in a car. Suddenly, at about a quarter to three on an August afternoon, he was walking down Division Street.

May Saunders was the first to see him. It was the hottest day of the year, and she was sitting under the awning of her dry goods store and fanning herself with a folded newspaper. Later, May said that it made her sweat twice as much just to look at that stranger walk under the blazing sun in a black derby, a black suit of a heavy material which would have served as an overcoat, a stiff white collar.

He didn't seem to mind the sun blazing down on him. He seemed unaware of anything as he made his slow, methodical progress toward the east end of town.

He was tall and looked even taller because of his incredible thinness. His nose was the beak of a bird of prey; his mouth was a bloodless down-turned gash; his skin was old parchment stretched over high cheekbones.

Roy Schenker, who came to the window of his lunchroom to watch him pass, said that the stranger put him in mind of an undertaker. Others said that the moment they laid eyes on him they felt something sinister about him, and old Ida Meadow insisted that at the sight of him she had shivered in the heat. Perhaps that was hindsight, for they said those things to the police after the stranger had called on Rose Decker. But there was no doubt that he was so unusual that everybody who saw him walk from Division Street to Oak Lane remembered him.

Old Mrs. Meadow's testimony was most important; she lived next door to the Deckers. She was sitting on a porch rocker and knitting a pullover sweater for one of her grandsons. She looked up and saw him coming up the quiet street, and she said she started to shiver.

The houses on Oak Lane had been built after the war, quickly, to cash in on the housing shortage, and they were all alike—blue and white frame structures, and so close that the occupant of one could almost reach over and touch the next. Turning her head, Mrs. Meadow saw Rose Decker stand on her own porch, not more than twenty feet away. Rose was also watching the stranger's approach.

Mrs. Meadow opened her mouth to comment on his queerness to her neighbor. She saw that Rose Decker was standing as stiffly as death, one hand clasped to her ample bosom and the other gripping the porch railing. There was no color in her face.

"What's the matter, Rose?" Mrs. Meadow asked.

Rose Decker did not reply; it was doubtful that she heard. Terror possessed her eyes staring down the street.

OLD MRS. Meadow looked again at the stranger. By that time he was opposite her house and still moving with those slow, funeral strides. The only part of Rose Decker that seemed alive were her eyes, and they moved in their sockets to watch him turn up her walk and mount her porch.

"I am here, Rose," he said.

Those were the only words exchanged between them at that time.

No greeting of any sort. Certainly not a smile, and not even a nod. Just, "I am here, Rose," as if he knew that for a long time she had been expecting him.

And with her face empty and body held rigid, Rose Decker crossed the porch and entered her house, leaving the door open. The stranger followed her, closed the door behind him.

The pleasing thought struck Mrs. Meadow that here was a possible tidbit of scandal. Rose Decker was a young woman of twenty-five, rather attractive in a buxom way, and she had been known to be free and easy with the men before her marriage two years ago. Mrs. Meadow's oldest grandson, Robbie, had attended State University with Rose Decker, and had told her that she had almost been expelled for the way she had carried on. Marriage, Mrs. Meadow decided, doesn't always change women like that.

But after a little consideration, she rejected the notion as ridiculous. The stranger was hardly a man any woman would find attractive. It was true that he had addressed her by her first name, but not with affection. Indeed, his voice had been rather grim.

Mrs. Meadow rose and went into her bedroom, which was separated by only ten feet from the Decker living room. Through open windows she heard voices in the other house, but they were so low that she couldn't distinguish a word that was said. After a while there was complete silence.

She returned to the porch and sat rocking and knitting and watching the Decker house. About twenty minutes after he had entered, the stranger came out. Without glancing at the woman who sat on the porch next door, he walked with his slow, methodical strides in the direction from which he had come.

It was then almost four o'clock. Mrs. Meadow went into her kitchen to bake pies for a church social that night.

At twenty minutes after six Herman Decker, a not particularly successful real estate broker, came home. A minute after he entered the house he phoned the sheriff.

* * *

Sheriff Oscar Thorn had invited his one deputy, George Barber, to his home for dinner. George had accepted with enthusiasm, for the sheriff's daughter was about the prettiest girl in town; she had black hair and eyes contrasting with fair skin, and her figure made men draw in their breaths.

At the table, George Barber sat opposite Lila Thorn with his soul in his eyes and only picked at his roast beef. For a lad with his huge build and huge appetite, that was a sure sign that he had gone overboard. Thorn wasn't sure that he approved; George was a decent enough young man, but Thorn's ambition for his daughter went beyond a fifteen-hundred-dollar-a-year deputy.

The phone rang. Oscar Thorn went out to the hall to answer it. He returned and stood grimly in the dining room doorway—a short, broad man filling the opening.

"Sorry to spoil your dinner, Lila," he said. "George and I have to leave. Rose Decker has been murdered."

"Murdered!" The word was a stricken cry in Lila's throat. She rose trembling to her feet. "Oh, no! Not murdered!"

Her father frowned. "Why take it like that? You weren't friendly with Rose Decker."

"Lila went to college with Rose," George pointed out brightly. "Don't you remember, Sheriff?"

"That so?" Thorn didn't remember. In her letters from State University, Lila had never mentioned Rose. "Well, let's get going, George."

They were at the Decker house some nine minutes after Herman Decker had returned home. Even so, a small crowd of neighbors had al-

ready gathered; children were on the sidewalk, the women on the porch, the men inside in the living room.

Herman Decker, a smallish, baldish man, sat crushed on the couch. Robbie Meadow was pouring him a stiff drink of rye. John Meadow, Robbie's father, was warning the others in the room not to touch anything until the sheriff arrived.

Then he saw Thorn and his deputy come in and he backed to one side of the room. He had been standing in front of the body where it lay at the foot of the coffee table.

Rose Decker's torso was weirdly twisted. Her skirt had hitched up, exposing a plump, white thigh. Her hands were still tightly clenched, as if in dying she had tried to cling to something. Her face was not good to look at.

Sheriff Thorn dropped to one knee. "Strangled," he said. A thick, square finger pointed to the throat. "See those marks of fingers. Somebody mighty strong choked her with his bare hands."

He turned and looked at Herman Decker. Everybody in the room looked at Decker. He was anything but strong. Still....

"I didn't do it!" Decker wailed. "My God, I loved her!"

Thorn straightened up—shorter than any man in that room, but, except for George, broader. "Call Doc Cohen," he told his deputy. Then he advanced to the couch where Decker huddled and planted his feet wide. "What do you know about it?"

"Just what I told you on the phone," Decker said thinly. "I came home and found her like that."

"Who wanted her dead?"

"My God," Decker said, "everybody liked Rose."

"Wait a minute," Robbie Meadow spoke up. "When we heard Rose was murdered, Grandma said she'd seen a strange looking man come to this house this afternoon.

"Where's your Grandmother?" Thorn snapped.

Robbie waved a hand. Through one of the open windows from the porch, the wrinkled face of old Mrs. Meadow peered into the room.

SHERIFF THORN went out to the porch, and from the old woman he heard for the first time about the stranger. Mrs. Ivy, who lived across the street, corroborated the story; she had also seen that man go into the Decker house. Very tall and very thin. "Gave me the shivers the moment I laid eyes on him," old Mrs. Meadow put in. "He killed her all right."

Thorn yelled for his deputy. "George, go look for him. Maybe he's still in town....And phone his description to the state police."

As George squeezed his big bulk into Thorn's sedan, Dr. Irwin Cohen arrived. "Strangled beyond doubt," the doctor asserted after his preliminary examination. "I agree with you, Sheriff—probably a powerful man did it. As for the time of death, I'll hazard a guess at this point that it's at least a couple of hours."

Thorn nodded. "The time is right for the man Mrs. Meadow saw. Open and shut—if we lay our hands on him."

* * *

Laying hands on the stranger proved a lot easier than he had dared hope.

Any sort of news spread through Rexton in thirty minutes; murder took half time. Roy Schenker phoned the Decker house and asked to speak to the sheriff. "I hear you're looking for that stranger who passed through town this afternoon." Schenker's voice was a cautious whisper over the wire. "Is it true what they say—that he murdered Mrs. Decker?"

"We think so."

"Funny," Schenker said. "You'd think he'd run away after he did a thing like that. Damn funny."

"What the devil are you trying to tell me?"

Schenker's voice drooped another octave. "He's right here in my lunchroom."

"What's he doing there?"

"Eating. What do you think folks do in a lunchroom? He's been here a whole hour, and what that man can pack away! He's already had three orders of—"

"I'll be right there," Thorn broke in and hung up.

George Barber had driven off in the sedan. Thorn borrowed Dr. Cohen's coupe without taking time to ask permission.

THE STRANGER sat off by himself at one of the three small tables lining the wall opposite the lunch counter. Placidly, after having gone through three orders of corned beef and cabbage, he was having a third slab of peach pie with a fourth cup of coffee, Roy Schenker, a fat man who could outeat any of his customers, wondered what became of all that food after it went down the stranger. Certainly it didn't put flesh on his bones.

He was nothing but bones. Even his hands, large though they were, showed corded veins running back from knobby knuckles, and the fingers were sinuous and writhed like the tentacles of an octopus.

Schenker moved closer to the rack of carving knives under the counter, ready to pluck out the most vicious if the stranger did anything but continue to eat. Five other diners sat at the counter, but Schenker had an uneasy feeling of being alone with a killer. He sighed audibly with relief when the sheriff entered the lunchroom.

Thorn sauntered casually to the table at which the stranger ate. He pulled out a chair, sat down. The stranger lifted dark brooding eyes sunk deep in bony sockets.

"Hearty appetite?" Thorn inquired affably.

The stranger chewed the pie in his mouth before he replied. "Who are you?"

"The county sheriff." He pulled back his jacket as if for coolness. A strap of his shoulder-holster was revealed and the black butt of his .38 automatic pistol. "Most men like to eat a good meal after they've done a job," he went on conversationally. "Though I don't suppose choking that woman was much exertion for you."

"Which woman?" the stranger inquired, lifting pie in his fork.

"Do you kill so many that you can't keep track? I'm talking about Rose Decker."

The fork hesitated, then continued to the bloodless slit of mouth. He chewed. Then he asked: "She was murdered?"

"Uh-huh. And you did it."

"I never even heard of her."

Thorn shook his head. "That won't get you anywhere; at least two witnesses saw you go into her house with her this afternoon."

Some pie remained on his plate, but the stranger didn't seem to want any more. He brooded down at it. All that Thorn could read in his face was a kind of sadness. "I don't know anything about it," the stranger said.

"You deny you were in the house with her this afternoon?"

"I don't know anything about it."

The five men at the counter had turned on their stools and were watching and listening. Roy Schenker's mouth gaped open, like a child's fasciated by something.

"Let's go where we can really talk," Thorn said to the stranger. "Say to the county jail."

The stranger put his hands flat on the table. They were long and thin and remarkably powerful, and Thorn felt prickles run up his spine. The hands lifted. Thorn pushed his chair back and crossed his right hand to his gun.

But the stranger only used his hands to wipe his mouth. He rose. He rose a long way toward the ceiling; then removed his black derby from a hook and clamped it on his head.

"It's a pity," he said in a voice that had no pity in it.

"That you murdered Rose Decker?" Thorn prodded.

The stranger impassively looked down at him from his superior height. "I don't know anything about it," he said.

Chapter Two



THE stranger said that his name was Eli Farr that was all the information Oscar Thorn could get out of him.

Mrs. Meadows and Mrs. Ivy came to the jail and identified him as the man who had called on Rose Decker. The state police dusted the Decker house for fingerprints and found a fat one of Farr's left thumb on the coffee table.

Eli Farr had one sentence, always the same, in response to all that. He didn't know what anybody was talking about.

In the morning District Attorney Herbert McMahon came down from Fort Hals. He was young and cocky. "I hear you got him cold, Oscar," he said buoyantly to the sheriff. "I haven't had a good prosecution in months."

"It's not so simple," Thorn replied wearily. "See if you can get anything out of him."

"Watch me," McMahon said.

Thorn watched him for three hours. and for three hours listened to Eli Farr, sitting invulnerable and impassive, repeat his one phrase like a litany: "I don't know a thing about it."

At the end of that time the bright young district attorney was limp and disgusted. "Nuts!" he said. "I'm hungry. How about inviting me to your house for lunch?"

McMahon was another of Lila Thorn's suitors; in fact, he was Thorn's own favorite candidate for the position of son-in-law.

At lunch, which Lila whipped up for them in ten minutes, McMahon complained: "What have we got on Eli Farr? That he was with Rose Decker in her house yesterday a few minutes before four o'clock. That we can prove, but that's all we can prove; being sure among ourselves that he's the murderer isn't enough to get a conviction."

"But he's not!" Lila burst out.

They stared at her. She dropped her eyes, and Thorn noticed how pale she was. She'd been that way since yesterday at supper when he had told her that Rose Decker had been murdered.

"How do you know he isn't?" he asked his daughter softly.

Lila ran her tongue over her lower lip. "I mean, would he remain in town if he'd murdered Rose? He must have been aware that he was seen entering and leaving her house."

"A crackpot," McMahon declared. "That's pretty obvious. I'm afraid that even if we get enough evidence to convict, he'll get away with an insanity plea."

"No," Liia insisted. "He didn't do it."

Thorn felt cold. He didn't say why, but coldness was suddenly deep in his bones. He said: "What makes you so sure, Lila?"

"Well—" Though she sat at the table as motionless as a staute, she gave an impression of squirming. She lifted her head, jutted her small chin. "For that matter, what makes you sure Rose's husband didn't kill her? He's a real estate broker; he hasn't any regular hours at his office. Suppose Herman Decker came home earlier than he said and heard from Rose that this man Eli Farr had been there, and he saw a way of murdering her and blaming it on Eli Farr." She was panting, as if with the exertion of getting all that out in one breath.

McMAHON kneaded a breadcrumb between his fingers. "You know, Oscar," he told the sheriff, "maybe Lila has something there. At the least, we ought to check if Decker has an alibi for yesterday afternoon between four and six."

"I'll check," Thorn said grimly. He kept his gaze on his daughter. "But what I want to know Lila, is why you're so sure that Farr isn't the killer? And why you were so upset yesterday when I told you Mrs. Decker was murdered. It's as if you—"

The ringing of the phone in the hall interrupted him. Thorn went out to answer it.

"Farr busted out of jail!" George

Barber blurted over the wire.

"What!"

"May Saunders saw him pass her store a few minutes ago."

"Did you check at the jail?"

"I didn't have time. I'm going to chase after him as soon as I hang up. I'm phoning from May's store. May knows what he looks like; she saw him yesterday. So tall and thin, she says, and walking so slow, and wearing that black derby and heavy black suit. Only this time he was going toward Pine Hill. May says—"

"Go after him," Thorn snapped.

He hung up and then dialed the county jail. Willie Bilk, the turnkey, answered drowsily.

"Farr?" Bilk drawled. "Hell, Sheriff I took in his lunch no more than five minutes ago."

"You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. He's eating now like he hasn't had a bite to eat in a week."

Frowning, Thorn returned to the dining room. "The heat's got May Saunders," he told McMahon and Lila, and repeated what Barber and then Bilk had said over the phone.

"Oh, God!" Lila cried.

She was leaning forward in her chair, her arms crossed over her breasts, and her black eyes were like those of somebody who was dying.

McMahon leaped up and rushed over to her side of the table. "What's the matter, Lila?"

She tossed her head and worked a sickish smile to her mouth. That was the only part of her face that smiled.

"It's nothing," she said. "Only that it's frightening to have a murderer walk around loose."

Thorn again felt that coldness in his bones. "A few minutes ago, Lila," he said quietly, "you were sure he wasn't a murderer."

"Well, you two men were theorizing, so I did too." But she kept her eyes averted as she said that.

Thorn, who had been leaning against the doorjamb, straightened his squat body. "There's something fishy. Lots of things maybe. I'm going to the jail. Coming, Herb?"

McMahon was reluctant to leave Lila, but his obligation as district attorney won out. Unhappily he nodded.

AT THE BRICK building, which housed the county jail and the sheriff's office, they found Eli Farr in his cell, complacently eating the lunch cooked for him by Mrs. Bilk. He glanced up at the sheriff and district attorney staring at him through the bars, then he lifted his cup of coffee and drank deeply.

"He's enjoying his lunch," McMahon pointed out with some bitterness. "Why shouldn't we go out and finish ours?"

But before they were out of the building Willie Bilk called after Thorn to tell him that George Barber was on the phone.

"I'm up at Pine Hill," George reported as excitedly as before. "He's in the Larkin house."

"Who is?"

"Eli Farr, of course."

"For your information," Thorn said sourly, "he's right here in his cell."

"He can't be. Listen, Sheriff. I trailed him all the way to Pine Hill, and Cecil Wilson said he saw him go into the Larkin house. I rang the doorbell and Bessie Anderson, the housekeeper, answered. When I described Farr, she admitted he was in the house, but she wouldn't let me in. So I went back to the Wilson house and phoned you at your home and Lila said you were at the jail. What should I do Sheriff? Can I force myself into the Larkin house if I know that an escaped prisoner is inside?"

"Farr," Thorn said weakly, "is right here in his cell."

"All I know, Sheriff, is that May Saunders and Cecil Wilson saw him, and Bessie Anderson admits that he's in the house. What should I do?"

Thorn drew in his breath. "Stay there till I come."

He hung up and looked hopelessly at McMahon. "Is everybody crazy or am I the only one?" he asked plaintively.

* * *

THE LARKIN house, as befitted the largest and swankiest in Rexton, had a macadam driveway which curved all the way up to the front porch and then ran back to the road in a sweeping arc. When Thorn, with

McMahon beside him, turned his car up the driveway, he heard Bessie Anderson's voice across three hundred feet of carpet-smooth lawn. "I knew you when you were in diapers, George Barber," she was saying, "so don't you go acting like a policeman with me."

From the foot of the porch, George grinned up at the housekeeper. She stood against the door as if barricading it with her frail, aged body. When the car pulled up, George turned his grin to Thorn. "See what I'm up against, Sheriff," he said.

Thorn and McMahon got out of the car and went up on the porch. "I want to see Mrs. Larkin," Thorn snapped.

Before the sheer weight of so much authority, Bessie faltered. "Mrs. Larkin gave me orders not to let anybody in," she whined.

"Then tell her to come out."

Bessie ducked into the house. Thorn hesitated, then followed. McMahon was at his heels.

In the square center hall, Bessie was knocking at a door. She turned when she heard the two men, but by then it was too late for her to do anything about it. Grace Larkin had opened the door.

"Since when," she demanded, "have the police the right to enter a private home without permission?"

Her tone and manner had the overbearing arrogance of the wealthiest woman in the county. But all the money which her father, now dead, had accumulated over the years hadn't been able to give her good looks or even charm. She was in her early twenties, but looked ten years older. She had the face of a horse, the complexion of an adolescent boy, the voice of a coffee grinder.

Thorn advanced toward her. "Get off your high horse, Grace. Can't you even talk to me?"

He could be informal with her because she was Lila's friend and used to come to the house often before her marriage. In fact, for one year they had roomed together when they had both attended State University.

"All right, talk to me," Grace Larkin said haughtily. "What do you want?"

She stood in the doorway, one hand holding the edge of the partly opened door. Over her shoulder Thorn saw a piece of the sitting room—and a man's legs. The man was sitting in an easy chair, probably slouching, for his extremely long legs were extended straight out. On his knees rested a black derby. The rest of him was blocked off by the door.

Thorn felt his scalp tighten. Those long legs were familiar—and so were the heavy black trousers and the high black shoes and the black derby. But the bewildering fact remained that only a few minutes ago he had left those legs and trousers and shoes and that derby in the county jail.

"The truth is," he said, "that I'd like to have a talk with that man."

The legs did not stir.

Grace Larkin said: "That's none of my concern. At the moment he's my guest and I must ask you to leave this house."

Thorn glanced at McMahon, who shrugged, passing it right back to him. "I suppose you've heard that Rose Decker was murdered yesterday," Thorn said to her.

"I've heard rumors."

"Murdered by a man who looks like your visitor."

He got the reaction from her that he was after. Her mouth went slack; terror leaped into her eyes. But within two seconds she recovered. Her unattractive mouth twisted in a sneer. "That's ridiculous."

"Listen," he said. "I'm going into that room. Don't try to stop me because—"

McMahon plucked urgently at his sleeve. "Let's go," he said.

Thorn drew in his breath. Then he nodded and he and the district attorney left the house.

WHEN THEY reached the foot of the porch, McMahon pointed out: "What would have been the good of forcing yourself into that room, Oscar? You wouldn't have found Eli Farr in there because he's in jail. That would make it forceable entry. Remember that Mrs. Larkin's husband is a lawyer, and he'd raise a stink."

Thorn scratched his nose. He was thinking of those familiar legs and that derby. "I'll wait here for him to

come out," he decided. "George, you go over to the jail. I'd like somebody beside Willie to keep an eye on Eli Farr."

McMahon looked at his watch. "Well, I can't hang around. I'm due back at my office.."

He and George departed together in the sheriff's car. Thorn sat down on a porch step and lit a cigar. In the house there was no sound for a long time.

Presently Bessie Anderson came out. She scowled down at Thorn. "Hasn't the sheriff anything better to do than sit on people's doorsteps?"

"Not till Mrs. Larkin's visitor comes out," he replied amiably.

"Then you'll wait a long time. The gentleman left a good twenty minutes ago."

Thorn stood up. "Through the back door, I suppose," he said sourly.

Bessie emitted an old woman's dry cackle and went back into the house.

From where he stood, Thorn heard in the house two women speaking to each other. One of them laughed—Mrs. Larkin, probably. He felt ridiculous. Snorting savagely, he tossed away his cigar and started to walk back to town.

A snappy convertibly with the top down turned into the drieway. When it reached Thorn, it stopped.

"Hi, Sheriff!" Philip Larkin said cheerfully. "Don't tell me my house has been robbed?"

Larkin seldom said anything that wasn't an attempt at a wisecrack, and his smile generally looked as if it had been pasted permanently to his handsome face. He was an athletic man deep in his thirties, and could have passed for the kid brother of his much younger wife. He practiced law in Fort Hals.

"Well—" Thorn hesitated. Then he decided that before nightfall everybody in town would know about this; if George didn't spread it around, Bessie Anderson would. So he told Larkin what he was doing there.

Larkin was merely amused. "Talk about wasting your time on false trails! That lad visiting my wife was probably just a salesman; she's a sucker for anybody who wants to sell her anything."

"Then why didn't she let me see him?"

"Grace gets haughty at times."

"And why," Thorn persisted, "did he sneak out the back door so he wouldn't have to face me?"

The edges of Larkin's smile got thin. "I'll ask Grace about him. If she tells me and if I think it's police business. I'll give you a ring."

He drove on to the front of his house. When he disappeared into the house, Thorn took a single step toward the road, then paused. He seemed to be listening to a bird chirpin on a telephone wire overhead.

Then a voice exploded inside the house. Philip Larkin appeared in the front doorway.

"Sheriff!" he yelled. "In the name name of heaven, come here!"

It was as if. Thorn thought as he raced to the house, he had been waiting for something like this.

Bessie, shaking and whimpering, stood outside the sitting room. Thorn brushed past her through the open door. Larkin was clinging to the back of a chair and staring down at his wife.

Grace Larkin lay on the floor. She was not as plump or as pretty as Rose Decker had been, but at that moment she looked very much the same. Because she had died in the same way.

Chapter Three



DR. COHEN said: "Choked with bare hands, as far as I can determine at the moment. Almost exactly like Rose Decker."

"By a man," Thorn muttered, "who can be in two places at the same time—in jail and here."

Sharply Dr. Cohen glanced at him over a shoulder. "A fascinating thought, Sheriff except that you don't believe it any more than I do."

"That's right, I don't. How long would you say she's dead?"

"Perhaps half an hour."

Thorn consulted his watch. "It's

just about ten minutes since her husband went into the house; he found her less than a minute after that."

"Well, I can tell you she's dead longer than that. I'll stick to around thirty minutes, give or take a few."

Thorn nodded. "Just about right for her visitor." And he thought bitterly that he could have saved her; he could have said the devil with being legal. Instead he had sat on the porch while on the other side of the wall she was being silently strangled.

He was still the only law officer in the house, and probably would be for some time. Dr. Cohen, who lived on Pine Hill, had had to come only a few hundred feet. The district attorney was on the way, and eventually a couple of state police laboratory men would show up. George Barber was hunting for the killer in town, while state troopers were watching highways.

Thorn had a feeling that it all added up to futility.

He left the sitting room, crossed the hall, entered the sumptuous living room. Philip Larkin sat deep in an armchair. He raised hollow, grief-stricken eyes. "But why?" Larkin demanded, as if resuming a conversation that had been broken off. "Why would a stranger come here and kill her?"

"He wasn't a stranger," Thorn said. "Not to your wife, anyway. Do you know anything that can help?"

"Nothing. I've never known a man of that description. I've never heard Grace mention him."

In another part of the house there was a mutter of voices. Thorn went into the kitchen. The three servants were there—Bessie Anderson, Steve Anderson, her husband and the handyman, and Hilda Dietz, the cook. When Thorn appeared, their talk ceased abruptly.

Thorn asked questions. The cook and the handyman couldn't contribute a thing; they hadn't been aware of the stranger in the house. Hilda had been resting in her room; Steve had been busy in the garage.

"Just before Mr. Larkin came home and found his wife dead," Thorn said to Bessie, "I heard two women speak in the house. I thought it was you and Mrs. Larkin."

"It was me and Hilda; she'd just come down from her room." Bessie dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "And all the time poor Mrs. Larkin was dead in the sitting room."

"Where were you when the visitor left the house?"

"Down in the laundry, in the cellar," Bessie replied. "There's a little window just over the washing machine, and I happened to look up and I saw him for an instant. He was going toward the footpath that leads down the other side of Pine Hill."

"How long after that was it that you came out on the porch and told me he was gone?"

"About twenty minutes. Then after I spoke to you, Hilda came down the stairs and we were talking to each other when Mr. Larkin came home. He asked me where Mrs. Larkin was and I said I thought in the sitting room and he opened the door and then yelled out. From the hall I could see her on the floor, so queer and twisted."

Thorn scratched his nose reflectively. "While you were in the cellar, would you have seen anybody entering or leaving the house through the back door?"

"Only if they walked along the left side of the house, like that stranger did. I couldn't see the right side at all."

THORN RETURNED to the hall. He stood there a long minute in indecision. The ringing of the phone roused him. He picked it up.

"Roy Schenker just phoned here," Willie Bilk said. "He says Farr is in his place again, eating a meal. He wants to know if Farr escaped or what. I looked in the cell and Farr's there all right. Sounds like everybody's crazy, but I figured I ought to tell you what Schenker said."

"Thanks, Willie," Thorn said quietly.

Again he borrowed Dr. Cohen's car to drive to Schenker's lunchroom. And when he got there, that tall gaunt man was sitting at the side table, and like yesterday the black

derby hung on a coathook in the wall. He was having pie and coffee.

Like yesterday, Thorn pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "Hearty appetite, Farr," he said.

The man's dark, brooding eyes rested on the sheriff. But they were different, somehow, and the face, though similiar to Eli Farr's, was not the same. It was somehow fuller, somehow younger, and the shoulders were broader; you had to look closely and without excitement to notice.

"How do you know my name?" the man asked indifferently.

"You resemble Eli Farr. You his brother?"

"Yes. I'm Aaron Farr." He leaned back in his chair. "Do you know Eli?"

It was very amiable—two men meeting over a lunchroom table. And Thorn said amiably: "I got to know Eli yesterday, when I arrested him for the murder of Rose Decker."

Aaron Farr's shaggy dark eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. That was the only sign of emotion on his face. "No," he said.

"As a matter of fact," Thorn went on in the same tone, "I'm about to arrest you for the murder of Grace Larkin."

Again the eyebrows lifted. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You admit that you were in her sitting room with her?"

"I—" Aaron Farr hesitated, then said woodenly: "I called on her, yes."

"And choked her."

"No."

THORN TOOK him to the county jail. There he confronted the brothers with each other. One said, "Hello, Eli," and the other said, "Hello, Aaron," and that was all they said to each other.

Herbert McMahon arrived, and he and Thorn worked on Aaron Farr. It was the same as yesterday over again. Like his brother Eli, he had a single phrase to answer all questions: "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Toward evening they gave up. They locked Aaron in a cell next to his brother's, and went into the office where Herman Decker and Philip Larkin were waiting. Thorn had sent for them.

"There's one thing we're pretty sure of," he told them. "The deaths of your wives are connected, but we have no idea why. I'm hoping one of you men might know."

Larkin was the one to reply, and he spoke hesitantly. "I'd never seen Grace and Mrs. Decker together. Decker and I know each other in a business way, he being a real estate brother and I a lawyer, but our wives didn't mix socially."

"She was too damn snooty," Decker burst out. "The rich Larkins of Pine Hill wouldn't contaminate themselves by contact with the Deckers of Oak Lane. Rose and Grace used to be friends in college, but when they came back to Rexton, Grace wouldn't give Rose more than an aristocratic nod when they met in the street."

"Look here," Larkin flung out at Decker, "I won't have you talk about my wife, especially now that she's dead and can't defend herself. There's no reason why a woman can't choose her friends without—"

Thorn jumped into the argument. "Wait a minute! They both went to State University at the same time; that's the one thing we know they had in common."

"I don't see anything in that," McMahon said dubiously. "For that matter, Lila also attended State University at that time, and she—" He stopped. He turned wide eyes to the sheriff. "Remember the way Lila acted at lunch today? As if she knew something about the murder. Did you get that impression, Oscar?"

"Yes." Thorn was staring bleakly out of a window. "But we have the two Farr brothers in jail. There's nothing to fear from them."

"Sure," McMahon agreed. "All the same, I'll stop off to see Lila on my way home."

McMahon left, and so did Larkin and Decker a few minutes later. Thorn sat slouched in a chair and studied the strip of highway baking under the descending sun.

After a while the phone rang. "He's here again!" May Saunders blurted.

"Is it true what they say—that he murdered both Rose Decker and Grace Larkin? Then why don't you keep him in jail? Do you want him to choke every woman in Rexton?"

Blood drained from Thorn's hand holding the phone. "In God's name, what are you saying?"

"This tall stranger in the black derby walked past my store just a minute ago. I almost died when I saw him. I locked myself in my store. I don't want him choking me. I—"

Thorn slammed the phone down on its cradle. He ran out to his car and drove like a maniac.

HIS HOUSE was very still. Like death, he thought hollowly, as he went through the front door. "Lila!" he yelled when he was in the living room.

There was an agonizing silence before a voice that was not Lila's spoke. "I am afraid that she is not in."

Thorn whirled. The tall, thin man was sitting in the wooden armchair in the left corner of the room, so that he had been out of Thorn's line of vision. He sat completely relaxed, with long legs extending straight out like twin poles, and his black derby rested on his knees.

Thorn's right hand moved toward his gun, but there appeared to be nothing hostile about the vistor. His bony fingers were clasped behind his head.

"Where's Lila?" Thorn demanded.

"She's not in. I'm waiting for her."

"That's right, make yourself at home," Thorn sneered.

Black eyes studied the sheriff with only vague curiosity. "Who may you be?"

"I'm Lila's father. Also, if it interests you, the county sheriff."

"I imagine," the man said, "that I owe an apology for intruding. I found the door unlocked, so I came in here to wait for Lila."

"What's your business with her?"

The man stood up. He was somewhat heavier set than the other two and somewhat shorter, which still made him tall and thin. He said politely: "I am sorry, Mr. Thorn, but my business is with Lila; I will return later this evening."

"Will you?" Thorn slipped his gun out of its shoulder-holster. "So there are three of you. Or are there still more Farr brothers?"

Sadly the man contemplated the gun. "Only three. You have met my brothers?"

"I've met Eli and Aaron."

"I am David." He sighed gently. "I assume that Lila told you."

"Yes," Thorn lied.

David put on his derby. "Where are my brothers?"

"In jail. Eli for the murder of Rose Decker and Aaron for the murder of Grace Larkin."

Like his brothers before him, David clamped his face shut at the mention of murder. It became a mask showing only static features. "You are telling me the truth, Mr. Thorn?" he asked tonelessly.

"Uh-huh. And what saved my daughter from being strangled like the others is that she wasn't home when you arrived."

David didn't deny it. He stared off at nothing, at a point over Thorn's head. And suddenly his foot lashed out.

Thorn had been watching the man's hands and torso; he hadn't considered the feet. With the speed and grace of a dancer, David's toes struck the back of Thorn's hand holding the gun.

Thorn gasped with pain. The hand opened as if by itself. Automatically he glanced down after the falling gun. David leaned forward and drove a bony fist, hard as rock, into Thorn's jaw. Thorn staggered, clawed air. The same fist or another struck again.

He went down and out.

Chapter Four



HIS gun was gone. It had been on the floor near where he lay. Pushing himself up to his knees, his eyes swept the room. His gun was gone because David Farr had taken it

with him after he had knocked him out cold.

Thorn rose groggily to his feet. Gingerly he felt his jaw. He'd been unconscious for ten seconds or ten minutes or longer—he didn't know. Those Farr brothers had the strength to strangle a woman or knock a man out with equal ease.

"Lila!" he shouted hoarsely.

The house remained silent.

He stumbled from room to room, calling his daughter's name, praying that she had not returned home before David Farr had left.

The house was empty. In the hall, he sank down at the telephone table, dialed a number. George Barber answered. "Come right over to my house," Thorn said and hung up and dialed another number.

"Oscar?" Herbert McMahon said at the other end of the wire. "How's Lila? I stopped off at your house, but she wasn't in."

Thorn told him about David Farr. "Three of them!" McMahon exclaimed. "And each one of them must have been assigned to kill a woman.

"Yes," Thorn said.

"But why those three women? Can it be because all three went to college together? But that doesn't make sense."

"We don't know what makes sense."

"Oscar?" Herbert McMahon said ing for Lila now?"

"I don't know," Thorn said. "We don't know a damn thing. We only—"

He heard the front door open. He spun in the chair, and there was Lila entering the house. In a single green dress, she looked cool and lovely and unperturbed.

"Hello, Daddy," she greeted him with that warm smile of hers.

"Where were you?"

"I spent the afternoon with Alice Waters."

The receiver was asking questions in Thorn's ear. He said to McMahon: "Lila just came in; she's all right." He hung up and stared bleakly at his daughter. "When I came home, I found David Farr waiting in the living room for you."

"David, too!" Lila's right hand gripped her left wrist, as if she were clinging to herself.

"A friend of yours?" he asked emptily.

"No. He—"

He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her as he used to when she had been a very small girl and had done something naughty. "Lila, don't you realize that he came here to murder you?"

"He didn't!"

"That's what Rose Decker and Grace Larkin thought, and now they're dead."

Lila pushed her face into her father's deep chest. "I can't tell you, Daddy; you'll hate me almost as much as I hate myself."

"Tell me! It may mean your life if you don't."

CLINGING TO her father there in the hall, she spoke in a thin, tired voice.

"It happened four years ago, when Rose and Grace and I were juniors at college. One evening the three of us went to the movies in town. We drove in Grace's car. On the way home the car struck a man who was walking along the road. Grace was at the wheel; she didn't stop."

Thorn's arms about her stiffened. "Hit-and-run," he grunted.

"Rose and I both yelled at Grace to stop the car," she went on against her father's chest, "but she drove on. I suppose that later, when I got out of the car, I should have told the police about the man we had hit. But Rose and I let Grace talk us into keeping quiet. She said that if he was dead, we couldn't help him; and if he wasn't, another car would have come along in a minute or two and have found him. She said that anyway we had already committed a crime by not stopping, and that if we said anything now we'd be arrested or at the least expelled from school."

She paused for breath. Thorn waited without comment.

"He *was* dead!" Lila burst out. "Next day we learned that the car had knocked him off the road and into some bushes, where only his legs stuck out, and his body wasn't

found until daylight. We never knew whether he'd been killed instantly or whether we could have saved his life by bringing help at once."

"Grace was the driver," Thorn said. "She was the one who didn't stop the car. Why did you let her ring you in on her crime?"

"Weren't Rose and I accessories after the fact by not letting the police know about the accident?"

"The police would have concentrated on Grace."

Lila shook her head. "But the college authorities wouldn't overlook it and we'd have been expelled. And there was I, the daughter of a sheriff, involved. You would have been hurt in some way, Daddy, and the man was dead; nothing we could do would have brought him back to life."

"You little fool!" he said and shook her again.

The doorbell rang. Over her head Thorn saw George Barber's face framed in the door window. He called to him to come in.

When George had closed the door and was standing against it, as if waiting for orders, Thorn said: "Go on, Lila."

Biting her lower lip, she glanced at George.

"Go on, Lila," Thorn repeated sharply. "A lot of people besides George are going to know about this."

She moved away from her father. For a moment he thought that she was going to run, but standing between the sheriff and his deputy she resumed her story without looking at either.

"Somebody saw the accident. It was Aaron Farr. He was parked on the other side of the road with the lights out. I don't know what he was doing there, but he saw the accident and wrote down the license number of Grace's car. Two days later he got in touch with Grace. He demanded the names of the two other girls who'd been with her."

"And she told him," Thorn said grimly. "That was her gratitude to you and Rose."

"He threatened to expose her if she didn't, and Grace had never cared for anybody but herself. That night she took Rose and me to a house in town, and there all three Farr brothers were waiting for us. You've seen them, Daddy. They're very quiet-spoken and polite, and also sinister and frightening. They wanted blackmail money, of course. They had it all planned, like an insurance company annuity. There were three of them and three of us. Each of us was to pay each of them four hundred dollars a month. I was to pay David; Rose was to pay Eli, Grace was to pay Aaron."

Thorn frowned. "You never asked me for that kind of money, and you never had it of your own."

"Neither did Rose. But Grace was very rich, and, after all, she was the one who had killed the man with her car. She said she would pay for the three of us."

"And she paid them blackmail ever since?"

"I suppose so. She could easily afford fifteen thousand dollars a year." Lila threw back her head to meet her father's eyes squarely and somberly. "Don't you see, Daddy, that they wouldn't kill any of us? It would be like killing the geese that laid the golden eggs."

"Do you know if Grace had stopped payments?"

"We never discussed it. Perhaps she did and that was why they came to Rexton."

GEORGE, WHO had been listening wide-eyed, spoke up. "Sure, that's it, Sheriff. Rose Decker was pretty upset when she saw Eli Farr come to her house, but she wasn't scared he'd hurt her. She asked him into her house to talk it over. The same went for Grace Larkin when Aaron visited her: she wouldn't let us in the house while he was with her, because if Aaron was exposed as a blackmailer, she'd be exposed as a hit-run driver."

"Could be," Thorn muttered. "And a little while ago David came here to find out from Lila why he hadn't received his payment."

George said: "And that's why Eli and Aaron aren't saying anything in jail to defend themselves. They can't

tell us why they went to see those women because then they'd be confessing to being blackmailers."

"And murderers," Thorn added stolidly.

"But, Daddy," Lila protested, "look at all the money they'd lose with us dead."

"That's theory," Thorn said. "On the other side are facts. "Like the fact that Eli was getting his money from Rose, even though Grace was paying it, and went to see her and she was strangled. And the same with Aaron and Grace. Those are all the facts we have, and they're not enough." Thorn scratched his nose reflectively. "George, have you got your gun?"

"Sure thing." The deputy patted his hip.

"You stay here with Lila," Thorn told him. "I'll see if I can make conversation with Eli and Aaron about blackmail." He went to the door and turned. "Don't let Lila out of your sight for a moment."

George grinned. He would have been happy not to let Lila out of his sight for the rest of his life.

THORN DROVE to the brick building which contained his office and three prison cells. There he found that the third cell, which had been empty, was occupied by Herbert McMahon and Willie Bilk. They were bound and gagged. The other two cells, which had contained Eli and Aaron Farr, were empty.

Thorn fetched spare keys from his office and unlocked the third cell and untied the district attorney and the turnkey. They were unharmed—merely very angry. But not as angry as the sheriff.

"The third Farr brother did it," McMahon explained. "The one named David. I decided to come back here to have another try at breaking down Eli and Aaron. When I entered the building, David was waiting for me with a gun."

"My gun!" Thorn said bitterly. "He knocked me out in my house and took it. He knew where to go to rescue his brothers because I'd told him they were in jail."

"I never had a chance," Willie Bilk put in. "He came in with a drawn gun and I didn't have time to go for my own gun. He made me unlock the cells. Then we heard somebody coming into the building and this third brother went out and brought back Mr. McMahon. Then the three of them tied us up and locked us in the cell."

Thorn twisted the cell key in his fingers, as if it was the collective neck of three tall, gaunt men. His hand was sweating.

"Did they say anything?" he asked.

"My Gawd!" McMahon burst out. "After they locked us in the cell, I heard Aaron say, 'We've got a job to finish.'" He grabbed Thorn's arm. "Where's Lila?"

"George is with her."

"One against three!" McMahon said. "Lila is the job they're out to finish. Come on!"

McMahon ran out, but Thorn kept his head. He stopped off in his office for two guns—a rifle and a revolver. Outside, McMahon was waiting impatiently behind the wheel of his car. Thorn placed the rifle between them and slipped the revolver into his empty shoulder-holster. McMahon drove like a man determined to wreck the car.

Twilight was falling when they reached the house. Thorn plunged through the front door and stopped.

George Barber lay motionless on the hall floor.

Thorn started to drop to his knees beside his deputy. He checked himself, pulled out his gun, stood very still, listening. All he heard was McMahon coming into the hall.

"Too late," Thorn said in a small, dead voice.

McMahon was crouching over George. He tilted his face up to Thorn. "He's alive. Got a sock on the back of his head that knocked him out cold." His mouth worked soundlessly before he could get out the next word. "Lila?"

Thorn didn't answer. Holding the gun against his hip, he stepped through a doorway into the living room.

Lila was in there. She lay at the foot of the couch, in that crumpled, twisted position that had become so terribly familiar to him.

Chapter Five



LILA was breathing. He heard her gasp raggedly for air when he got closer to her. One hand clawed feebly at her throat, as if in an exhausted effort to tear something away from it.

Thorn stuck his revolver into his belt and lifted her limp body to the couch. When he straightened up, he saw that McMahon had come into the room. His finger was on the rifle trigger.

"Was she choked?" McMahon asked tightly.

"Seems so." Thorn's revolver was back in his fist. As he spoke, he concentrated on the silence inside and outside the house. "I guess we came just in time. He heard us and ran out the back door before he'd done more than choke her into unconsciousness."

"He?" McMahon said. "You mean three of them. They said they had a job to finish. This is what they meant."

Lila's eyelids were blinking. With an effort, they rose all the way and stayed open, and the blackness of her eyes was clouded with pain and terror. A choked sigh passed her lips when she recognized her father.

"Who did it?" he said harshly.

She tried to force words past her tortured throat, but all she could bring up was a rattling cough. She lay back on the couch, panting.

"Take it easy, Lila," McMahon said. "You can tell us later."

Thorn's broad shoulders jerked erect. In another part of the house was a sound. A half-muted cry, a squeal, a gasp—he wasn't sure exactly what. Tensely he listened, but it was not repeated.

"Stay here with her," he told McMahon.

Just outside the kitchen door, Thorn and his revolver. "I wasn't

Thorn paused. In the gathering dusk, it was darker in the house than outside, and all that he could distinguish were the blurred outlines of furniture. The light-switch was within reach of his hand, but he did not touch it. After a moment he moved on to the door leading from the kitchen directly to the back yard.

Not ten feet from the back door there were four men at the edge of the small back lawn.

The deepening twilight exaggerated the gaunt tallness of the two who were standing. Their dark clothes and the rigidity of their positions gave them somewhat the effect of totem poles, topped with knobs which were their derbies. The third Farr brother was silently, methodically strangling a fourth man with his powerful hands.

Thorn stepped through the door. "That'll be enough," he said.

The brother with hands about the writhing man's throat raised his head. Thorn thought that he was Aaron, but he wasn't sure at the moment. It didn't matter. Those bony fingers did not relax their death grip.

"I'll shoot!" Thorn warned.

One of the watching brothers said quietly: "You'd better let him up, Aaron."

The hands opened. The man fell to the ground. Convulsively he rubbed his throat. And Thorn saw then that he was Philip Larkin.

ELI FARR said: "All Aaron was doing to him was what Larkin did to two women and almost did to your daughter."

"There's a law handles that," Thorn said.

Larkin pushed himself up to his feet. He swayed; he strove to paste his perpetual smile back on his handsome face, but it was like a dying man's smile.

"Of course, they're lying, Sheriff," he said. "I saw one of them strangle Lila, and they were out to kill me to keep me from telling."

Aaron turned to his brothers with a shrug. "What did I tell you? We can't prove anything." He looked at quite going to kill him, Sheriff. We wanted to make him confess. We were sure it was Grace Larkin's husband who killed those women and tried to pin the murders on us; that was the only way it figured out."

Thorn nodded. "I see what you mean. But the law will prove it in its own way."

Behind him the kitchen light went out. Thorn didn't risk turning his head. He waited and George Barber came out and stood beside him. He was still groggy from the blow on his head, but the gun in his hand was steady enough.

"Who knocked you out, George?" Thorn asked.

"I didn't see. I came out to the hall and the ceiling fell on me. I guess he was standing at the side of the door."

Larkin started to laugh, but the sound died on his lips. Lila and McMahon were coming through the kitchen door. He was supporting her with an arm about her waist. His other hand held the rifle under his armpit.

Lila said hoarsely: "It was Philip Larkin. I saw his face while he was choking me."

LARKIN GLANCED around, as if seeking an avenue of escape. All three Farr brothers moved, forming a semicircle to block him off. George stepped sideways to more adequately cover Larkin with his gun.

"It was your wife's money you wanted, wasn't it?" Thorn said to Larkin. "Grace wasn't attractive; you married her only because she was rich. Maybe you were thinking of murder from the moment you married her, but if she was murdered you'd be the first suspected. You had to be clever. You learned that she was paying blackmail to the Farr brothers. Maybe she told you, or maybe you saw a letter. One of you Farrs can help me out here."

None of them said anything. Thorn hadn't expected them to. They weren't murderers, but they were almost as bad.

"All right," Thorn said. "You Farr brothers figured out the way it was, and I can do the same. Larkin couldn't get away with murdering his wife alone, but he could if it was one of a series of murders, and especially if he could pin them on others. Probably Larkin got hold of a letter containing the blackmail money Grace was mailing out. He made sure it wasn't mailed. He knew that not getting the money would bring you three to Rexton."

Eli said: "We wrote Grace Larkin that—"

"Shut up, Eli!" Aaron cut him off.

"Good enough," Thorn said. "You wrote her that you were coming for the money if it wasn't received within a few days. Grace was paying for all three, but that wasn't your concern. You wanted four hundred a month from each woman. You set out to scare them into paying up. Probably you wrote that at a certain time one of you would visit the woman who was supposed to be paying you. First one of you, then the second, then the third."

Aaron smiled. "We wrote that each of us would visit one of the women at certain different times. Obviously Larkin intercepted the letter."

"Uh-huh," Thorn said. "He was hiding in the Decker house when Eli was there, and when Eli left, Larkin strangled Rose and sneaked out the back way. This afternoon Larkin was hiding in his own house when Aaron visited Grace. When Aaron left, Grace was alone in the sitting room. I was outside and there were two servants in the house, but Larkin could easily slip into the sitting room and choke his wife and then leave through a side window. He went down the Pine Hill path to where he'd hidden his car and then calmly drove up to the house."

Thorn paused. He felt Lila at his side, clinging to him. She had not gone to McMahon or George, but to her father; it pleased him.

"And this evening Larkin had to complete the pattern," Thorn went on. "Each of the three Farr brothers coming to Rexton to kill a woman he had been blackmailing. He had to murder three times to get away with the murder of his wife, but it was the only way he could be safe. Or so he thought."

Philip Larkin moved suddenly. He dove between two of the Farr brothers, using their bodies to shield him from the guns. But there was a third brother.

David leaped. His fist lashed out, and Larkin went down the way Thorn had gone down when he'd been struck with that fist. Larkin lay still.

"Thanks, David," Thorn said.

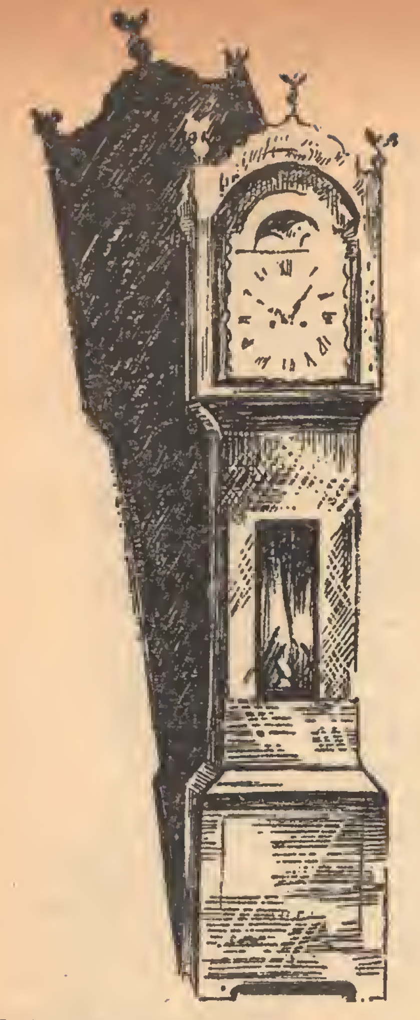
David shrugged and rubbed his cracked knuckles. "There's nothing more for us in this town, brothers," he said. "Let's go."

Thorn lifted his revolver slightly higher. "Just a little matter of blackmail," he said. "You three are under arrest."

Abruptly the three brothers froze. Only their eyes shifted in their sockets, taking in Thorn's revolver, George's automatic, McMahon's rifle. They were like three grotesque and sinister totem poles topped by three derby hats.

Thorn knew that he wouldn't breathe easily until he had them locked in a stronger prison than the county jail.

THE END



Hickory, Dickory, Death!

By Ray Cummings

(author of "My Friend, The Killer")

The killer had too much time to spare, and left too many clues.

CONE DROVE swiftly. The road left the woods, mounted a hill into the pallid moonlight.

"By what they phoned me," Sergeant Grant was saying, "they found him just a few minutes ago, up in his second floor study. Big silver paper knife was stabbed into his heart."

"R. J. Thompson?" Cone said.

"Yeah. The Thompson Theatrical Enterprises."

"I've heard of him," Cone said. "Who found him?"

"Seems it was his sister—I met her once—elderly spinster lady. She and a cousin named Peter Rance; seems a thump or something woke 'em up. They heard running footsteps—"

"Inside the house?" Cone interjected.

"Yeah. Guess so. Anyhow, the killer got away."

"I imagine that's the place up there," Cone said.

It was a big, rambling old house set in a grove of trees on the hill. Despite the fact that it was now one-thirty in the morning, lights blazed in most of the windows. Cone drove his car up to the side porte cochere; the police car behind him rolled up and stopped; and four of Grant's uniformed men climbed out.

"Here we are," Cone said. "Go to it, Sergeant."

The frightened inmates of the house, three men and one woman, were all gathered in the big lower hall. "He—he's up in his study—that's where we found him," one of the men said excitedly. "You're Sergeant Grant? I'm Peter Rance, his cousin. His sister is here and we phoned you right away."

Rance was a dark-haired, heavy-set man of about thirty-five. His face was heavy-jowled, with bushy black eyebrows. He was clad now in dressing gown over his pajamas.

"This is his sister, Miss Ellie," Rance added.

The woman was a thin, faded spinster of sixty-odd. Her grey hair was in curlers. In dressing gown and slippers over a flannel nightgown she sat slumped on a settee against the wall; she was weeping silently.

"Just you four in the house?" Sergeant Grant asked.

The other two men were standing against the wall, blankly staring. One of them spoke up. "Yes," he said. "Just us. We were all asleep. Then we—we—"

Grant's men tramped past. A big curving staircase led upward from the hall. "Take a look around," Grant said. "Dr. Blake ought to be here pretty soon—I phoned him. I'll be up in a minute."

"I suggest they tell us exactly what happened," Cone said. "There was an alarm—a noise upstairs? And running footsteps?"

"Yes," Rance said. "We were asleep—there must have been a bump—some noise. His study's up there—way down at the end of the long south wing."

"Who are these other two?" the Sergeant demanded.

One was Kennedy, the family servant—a short, stocky, middle-aged man. Fully clad, in butler's uniform, he stood stiff and stolid, waiting to be questioned.

"You didn't get dressed in all this excitement?" Cone said. "You hadn't gone to bed when the alarm came?"

"No," the butler agreed. "Such a nice warm summer night—I went out for a walk."

"Where?" Cone said.

"Just around the grounds. Then I heard Mr. Rance shouting, and Miss Ellie screamed. I came running in through the kitchen door—"

"And you?" Cone said.

The third man was a tall, lean blond fellow. He looked like an actor, which he was. "I'm T. Cuthbert Tarlton," he said; and paused for the impression he obviously expected to make.

"I've heard of you," Cone said. "In that play, '*The Flame*'—"

"I had the lead," Tarlton said. "And in most of Mr. Thompon's dramatic productions, I—"

"Thanks," Cone said.

TARLTON'S hand brushed his wavy blond hair; he drew in the corded belt of his ornate dressing gown; but Cone had turned away.

"You tell us," Sergeant Grant said to Peter Rance. "Seems you're the one who first heard the noise."

"We were all asleep—" Rance began.

"You said that before," Cone said. "Begin further back, during the evening, for instance."

Rance was nettled. He frowned. "Perhaps you have the authority—"

"He has," the Sergeant cut in caustically. "He's Melvin Cone, in case you want to know. Friend of mine. Answer his questions."

Cone smiled. He was a tall, spare man, in dark civilian clothes. Sometimes he had been told that he looked like Basil Rathbone, as Sherlock Holmes. It annoyed him exceedingly. "Sorry," he said. "I'm just an amateur dabbler in this sort of thing. But if you don't mind."

Rance answered the smile. "Okay with me," he said. "During the evening? Well, we were all here; we played cards down here for a while."

"Mr. Thompson was in the city," Cuthbert Tarlton, the actor, said. Thompson had arrived home about ten-thirty. He had gone directly upstairs to his study. "He was in a mood," Rance said.

"Angry?" Cone interjected.

"Yes. I supposed it was at me. When something goes wrong at the office, I generally get the blame. You see, I'm his business manager, as well as his cousin."

An arriving car sounded outside. It was Dr. Blake, the County Medical Examiner. He went directly upstairs, followed by Sergeant Grant. Then in a moment, Grant came back. His ruddy face was grim.

"Stabbed in the back," he said. "Knife blade penetrated the heart; the doc says he died almost instantly. Better come up," he added to Cone. "Seems like there's quite some clues around."

"I'm interested in those running

footsteps," Cone said. "Let's hear about it, Mr. Rance."

THOMPSON had gone up to his study, and in a few minutes had come back to the head of the stairs and called down for Cuthbert Tarlton. The actor had gone up. Thompson had brought home with him the script of his new drama, "*Banners in the Heart.*" Tarlton was here as a visitor over the weekend. He wanted the lead in "*Banners in the Heart,*" and Thompson called him up now to discuss it with him.

"He told me to read some of the passages in Act One," Tarlton explained. "So I did and—"

Kennedy, the butler said suddenly: "I think I should inform you, Mr. Cone, that I chanced to be in the upper hall, down near the study at the end of the wing. And I heard—"

"Oh, so you're the listening type?" Cone said.

The stolid butler was imperturbable. "Well sir, if you do not wish me to—"

"Go ahead," Cone said.

The butler had heard Thompson and Tarlton quarreling. Thompson thought he was inadequate to handle the lead. "They were cursing each other," Kennedy said. "I was very disturbed, Sir. They seemed about to come to blows."

"Is that correct?" Cone demanded of Tarlton.

The actor glowed sullenly. "We had a difference of opinion," he said. "There was nothing else."

Then Thompson had come out to the top of the front stairs again and called for Rance. This was at about eleven o'clock. "I went up and joined them in the study," Rance said. "For half an hour or more, I cued Mr. Tarlton in the part; but it was no go. Mr. Thompson didn't like him, and that was that."

Tarlton had come down in a huff, telling his troubles down here to the sympathetic Miss Ellie.

Rance went on, "For a while I discussed with Mr. Thompson who else we might get for the lead. Then I came down—had a consoling drink with Mr. Tarlton—and then we all went to bed."

"What time was that?" Cone asked.

"About quarter past twelve," Rance said. "This clock down here in the hall was just chiming the quarter hour." He gestured toward an onyx clock on the hall mantle.

"I remember it," Tarlton agreed. "Quarter past twelve, and we went upstairs to bed just a little while after that."

"Where were you all this time?" Cone said suddenly to the butler.

"In the kitchen sir," the butler said. "And in my room, which is adjacent."

"But you weren't sleepy," Cone said. "So, maybe about one o'clock, you went out into the garden for a bit of fresh air—"

"Exactly, sir," the butler said. "Then I heard the shouting in the house."

The alarm had come shortly after one o'clock. "I guess I hadn't any more than gotten asleep," Rance said. "We're in a different wing, upstairs. Quite a ways from the study—this is a very big house. You can't hear much, if anything, from one part to another. But in the silence of the night—"

A thump. Some loud, sudden noise. Rance had come running out. He had awakened Miss Ellie, and she had screamed. Then they had run to the study; and Tarlton had been awakened by the scream and come running after them.

"We found him," Rance said. "Well, lying there just as you'll see him now."

"The running footsteps," Cone said. "Were they inside the house, or outside?"

"Inside," Rance said.

"Upstairs, or down?"

Rance looked rather dubious. In all that excitement, he couldn't remember.

"Thank you," Cone said. "We'll go upstairs now."

Sergeant Grant was gazing at the butler. "There wouldn't be any back stairs, down from that south wing, would there?"

"Why yes, sir," the butler said. "The back stairs are just beyond the study."

"Interesting," Cone said, "Come on up, Sergeant, and we'll take a look."

"May we come?" Rance said.

"Come ahead," Cone agreed. "But not Miss Ellie. I think she—"

The elderly woman was still dazed. "If I could go to my room, just lie down—"

"We'll take you," Cone said gently.

THEY WENT up the big curving staircase. The bedrooms were fairly close together, in a wing that led off to the right from the upper central hall. Then, with the woman in her room, the men came back, past the head of the stairs, and into the south wing, to the left. It was a long, narrow, padded hallway. At its end, where a steep flight of back stairs went down into the region of the kitchen, were the rooms of R. J. Thompson—the small study in which he had been killed, with his bedroom and bath adjoining.

"You wait out here," Sergeant Grant said.

The butler stood stolid. "Okay," Rance said.

"If there is anything we can do to help," the actor murmured. "This terrible thing—"

Dr. Blake came out. "Inquest in my office, in the morning," he said. "Say eleven o'clock?"

"Okay," Grant agreed. "An autopsy?"

"Well, maybe. But that knife wound in the heart killed him; no argument on that."

For a moment Cone stood silent in the doorway, gazing at the scene of the little study. It was a lavishly furnished room, with framed pictures of theatrical celebrities nearly solid on its walls. Across it, a doorway led into Thompson's bedroom, with the bath beyond. Cone gestured. "No other exit through that bedroom?"

"No," one of the policemen said. "Nothin' at all. "

The body of R. J. Thompson—a slight, grey-haired man of about sixty, in a brown smoking jacket—lay slumped in a big easy chair. The body dangled forward over one of the chair arms, with arms hanging limp. In its back, where a little stain had spread, a big silver ornamental paper knife was buried to its hilt. A small, colored silk table scarf was wound around the knife handle.

"Had his mind on fingerprints," Cone commented softly.

In the silence of the room, the slow ponderous ticking of a big clock was audible. It was against one wall—an old fashioned "Grandfather's clock." It stood on the floor, a narrow, upright mahogany case nearly ten feet high with the big clock face at the top. Behind its glass front, the long pendulum was visible, sweeping slowly back and forth. The clock now marked twenty-five minutes of two.

"Some queer things around here," Sergeant Grant commented, out of the silence.

"Quite so," Cone agreed. "There's what made the thump that aroused the house, evidently. That little statue."

Queer things indeed. "Look," Grant said; "there sure wasn't any fight— Thompson had no warning. See, he was here in his chair, with the table beside him."

A small low table stood close to the chair. There was a blank scratch pad and a leadpencil on the table, a big ashtray, cigarettes and matches, and a script of "*Banners in the Heart.*"

"The killer evidently moved around behind him, snatched up that paper knife—" Grant added.

"And the scarf came from this little taboret behind him," Cone said. "You can see the dusty surface outlining where it lay."

Obviously there had been no scuffle. Everything around the murdered man was undisturbed.

"Now what beats me," Grant said. "That statue falling to the floor caused the noise that aroused the house—but what made the statue fall?"

IT WAS a small, heavy bronze bust of the poet Milton. It lay on the polished hardwood floor. The

pedestal from which it had fallen was obvious. From the doorway, Peter Rance said, "That's right. It always stood there."

"But the pedestal's ten feet from the body, over there out of the way against the wall," Sergeant Grant said. "Now why in the devil was that killer so dumb as to knock it off?"

"Interesting, *very* interesting," Cone murmured. "If that statue hadn't fallen, the house probably never would have been aroused."

Then Cone was gazing at the big glass ashtray, on the table beside the body. There was a burned match stump in it, and ashes. Cone bent down with a magnifying glass.

"Some cigarette ashes," he said. "But this larger pile—looks as though one of the sheets of that scratch pad was burned here."

Then he straightened. "That's what it is," he said. "The top sheet of that scratch pad, with pencilled notations on it. Lead is a mineral, it doesn't burn."

"And you can read something on the ash?" Grant said tensely.

"Take a look," Cone said.

The curled, blackened ash of the burned sheet of paper was broken, but on it, etched clearly in white, there were the letters—"*tumes.*"

"Now what in the devil does that mean?" Grant demanded.

But Cone, with his glass, was now examining the empty white sheet on the top of the scratch pad. "This is a hard leadpencil, a number three," he said. "Some of the indentations of the writing on that sheet that got burned, came through here,"

Like ghost writing. Cone tilted it; he read: "Costumes padded—"

"Padded costumes?" Grant echoed. "So what?"

"And it says," Cone added, "expense account, padded $1725. A padded costume account. And a padded expense account." Cone was obviously tense now. He ignored Grant's questions. He turned from the table, gazing down at the floor of the room.

"These blood smears," he said softly. "Very queer. That wound didn't bleed much; there's no blood on the white scarf around the knife handle, no blood splattered anywhere near the body. Why should there be a blood smear on the floor, out here in the center of the room?" But there it was, plainly visible on the floor's light hardwood surface. "And here's another, still further from the body," Cone added.

Then Cone was gazing at the three men in the doorway—the stolid, stocky butler; the bushy-browed, heavy-set Rance; and the pale, somewhat effeminate, handsome Cuthbert Tarton. All of them were staring, tense, silent. "On Mr. Thompson's left fourth finger, the skin shows a white band, whiter than the rest of the hand," Cone said suddenly. "He evidently wore a big ring there."

"Why of course he did," Rance exclaimed. "A big ruby and sapphire, quite valuable. And it's gone!"

"Yes," Cone agreed. "It's gone."

"He had it on tonight," Tarlton murmured. "Yes, I remember he did."

"Of course he did," Rance agreed.

Both of them were gazing at Kennedy the butler; and he nodded agreement. But Cone was again interested in the bloodstains. They seemed like a trail, leading him across the room—leading him toward the big Grandfather's clock. Then he was standing before the clock. He took out his watch, glanced at it, and stood pondering.

IN ANOTHER tense silence, Sergeant Grant murmured, "What's the idea? You got some real lead? All these weird damn clues—"

"There's a blood smear here on the clock," Cone said. "Right here by its little doorknob."

Cone pulled on the knob. The glass front of the clock swung out, a door panel exposing the long, slowly swaying pendulum.

Gingerly Cone reached in, and avoiding touching the pendulum, he fumbled around inside. Then his hand darted behind the pendulum, following its slow swing; and as he touched something, he gave a low whistle.

"Well!" he said. "There it is. The ring! It's lying there in the bottom of the pendulum!"

Grant stared blankly. "Thompson's ring? In the pendulum?"

At the bottom of the long pendulum, there was a big, carved, ornate piece of bronze. "There's a lead knob behind it," Cone said. "A blob hollowed out so the pendulum weight will be just right. The ring is lying there."

"Fish it out. Let's see it," Grant said. But Cone ignored him. Cone's eyes were flashing.

"Queer place to hide a ring," he murmured. "Now who would know about that hollow in the back of the pendulum?"

"I get it!" Grant exclaimed. "The killer unexpectedly made a noise—aroused the house. The ring was valuable, he needed the money, when he unexpectedly caused the alarm, he had to get out of here in a hurry, an' he was afraid to take the ring with him, afraid he'd get caught with it. So he hid it in the pendulum—"

"But he had to know about that pendulum," Cone interjected. "At best, it was a strange thing to do—"

Then Sergeant Grant swung around, glaring at the three men at the door. "You, Kennedy," he said to the butler. "How about it? You maybe often dusted the inside of that clock—"

"No sir," the butler denied emphatically. "No one touched it but Mr. Thompson—him, and—and—"

Both the butler and Rance were staring at Cuthbert Tarlton. "Come on, out with it," the Sergeant said.

"Well," the butler said reluctantly. "Mr. Tarlton was the only one who ever tinkered with that clock. It always keeps perfect time. Mr. Thompson loved that clock—he was proud because it never was a minute off."

"That's true enough," Rance agreed. "He checked it by Western Union nearly every night at midnight. He even did that tonight, when I was here with him at midnight and I laughed at him. It was right on the dot, only a few seconds off. He was very pleased. He said, 'Well, that's one thing about Cuthbert—he's a rotten actor, but he understands that clock."

Sergeant Grant was at the doorway, confronting them now. "Well, now we're getting at it!" Grant exclaimed. "How come you were so expert about the insides of that clock, Tarlton?"

The actor's handsome face had gone paler than before. "Why—why," he murmured, "what they say is quite true. That was my father's clock. In our family for years. Father and Mr. Thompson were great friends, and when father died, he gave Mr. Thompson the clock."

"And you knew about that hollowed-out place in the back of the pendulum?" Cone put in.

"Yes, I—I did," Tarlton admitted. "I often adjusted the pendulum for Mr. Thompson—"

"Okay," Grant said. "An' tonight you had a fight with him. So you sneaked back in here about one o'clock when everybody was asleep—killed him an' took his ring! Why not? You needed the money—actors are always broke, an' you'd just been fired out of this new play. Then like a damn fool, you knocked over that statue, an' you had to get out of here in a hurry; so you hid the ring in the pendulum—who in the devil would ever look for it in a place like that?"

"Wait!" Cone cut in. "Take it easy, Sergeant. You forget that trail of blood-smears which led me to the clock so I'd find the ring!"

GRANT STARED blankly. Cone had been consulting his watch again. He replaced it in his pocket. He added, "It isn't quite like that, Sergeant. What you don't realize—there are two kinds of clues here. Real clues, and phony clues."

"Phony clues?" Grant echoed.

"I agree with you, this killer was pretty dumb," Cone said. "But he thought he was smart; he wanted us to find that ring in the clock, so he plastered blood around which would lead us to it."

"So we'd get after Tarlton?" Grant said.

"Exactly. And that fallen statue," Cone went on, "falling about one o'clock and alarming the house. As

you said, it was queer that the killer would knock it off when it's over there so far away. Another phony clue!"

"But the alarm at one o'clock?" Grant protested.

"That was phony too," Cone retorted. "There had to be an alarm, so it would be reasonable that the frightened, hurried killer would hide the ring!"

With a sudden, swift leap Cone was confronting Peter Rance. "You claimed you heard a thump, and dashed out and gave the alarm," Cone said. "And claimed you heard running footsteps! The killer escaping!"

Rance had gone ashen. "I—I did hear them," he said. "Are you trying to—"

"Accuse you? Of course I am! There wasn't any thump, no rumbling footsteps! Why did you wake up Miss Ellie? Why not wake up Tarlton? Because you knew Miss Ellie would be too dazed and terrified to know whether she had heard a thump and footsteps or not! And you wanted Tarlton to arrive on the scene late enough so we'd be sure and suspect him!"

"You lie!" Rance gasped. "You're just talking. You can't prove—"

"And mixed up with your phony clues, there were real clues you didn't know you'd left! You burned that scratch pad sheet, but forgot the one under it! Your motive for the killing! You're Thompson's General Manager. He was confronting you with padding your expenditures! Isn't that it? Expense account padded $1725. Costume account padded. An embezzler. Stealing his funds, falsifying the records! Isn't that it?"

"You—you lie!" Rance stammered. "You can't prove I killed him. I was with Miss Ellie—she'll tell you—"

"Don't make me laugh," Cone said. "That was at one o'clock, during the fake alarm."

"But wasn't the murder committed at one o'clock?" Sergeant Grant put in.

"Of course it wasn't!" Cone retorted. "When he hid the ring right after the murder, he created the one vital clue which he didn't know he was leaving!"

CONE GESTURED to the big clock. Its hands now marked quarter of two. "That clock was correct at midnight tonight," Cone said to Rance. "You said so yourself. You were here and Mr. Thompson checked it with Western Union."

"That's right," Rance said. "I told you—"

"But the clock isn't correct now!" Cone said. "The correct time is two A. M. It's lost fifteen minutes! It's running slow! From the moment you put the ring in the pendulum, it began running slow! Why? Because the weight of the ring, in effect lengthens the pendulum, makes the clock run slower!"

Cone's swift voice was ironic. "You ought to know that, Rance, but you never thought of it, did you? I've been timing the rate at which the clock is losing. One minute in eight minutes; so far, it's lost fifteen minutes. Just simple arithmetic to figure back to when the ring was put there. Two hours ago! That was at midnight, Rance—midnight, when you were here alone with him!"

There was an instant of gasping silence, then the terrified, panic-stricken Rance suddenly jumped back through the doorway, trying to get away. But like a cat Cone was on him, gripping him; and then the Sergeant and one of his men had him, pounding him with questions until at last he broke down. "You—you've got me," he mumbled. "I never thought anything about that damn clock—"

"If you'd just stabbed him and let it go at that," Cone said, "we might have had a tough time. Your trouble was, you left too many clues."

THE END

BLONDE BAIT for the

A Suspense-Ridden Novel of

Skippy Jorio had tried to be too wise, and I had a job to do . . .



MURDER MASTER

Diabolical Greed

by

John D. MacDonald

The plan was simple at first, and then, when we started, I knew that this conspiracy to hijack the Syndicate was the master of all of us. But I was smart . . . so damned smart, and I knew we could play with murder and not get burned!



"IT'S LIKE in a bank," Brock Sentosa said, smiling at me. "You count this stuff long enough and maybe you could be counting beans, or old movie stubs."

Maybe Brock had given himself time enough to get casual about the greasy wads of currency that cov-

ered the two card tables in what had been a "Play room" in the cellar of the rented house at 1012 Cramer. But I couldn't be casual about it; I was too new at it.

Anna Garron sat at another card table off to one side, checking the winning ticket returns against the amounts turned in by the retailers. She was blonde and lovely, and if you didn't think about it, she looked like any pretty and competent secretary working in any office. But then you'd notice that her clothes weren't quite the sort that would be acceptable in an office; and her makeup was just a shade theatrical, and tinv lines that edged the corners of her mouth gave her a hard look.

Brock had finished counting the twenties, tens and fives, and was putting the ones in stacks of a hundred. The silver was already in a canvas sack. I leaned against the door and watched him and thought of how little I knew about him. Brock Sentosa is a man with a smiling face. Meeting him on the street or in a bar you'd take him for a goodnatured clown. His dark hair is thin and receding and his cheeks are plump, like a squirrel with a hazelnut in each cheek. It's the eyes that give him away. They are a pale and yellowish brown, and have a dull tarnished look, as though they had been buffed with fine sandpaper. It is athough a corpse wore the mask of a living man.

But I had no kick coming. He had picked me up when I was the lowest, and started me in at more money than I had ever seen before.

He could afford it, because the syndicate he works for has the formula for success. It is an old story but none the less effective because it is old. Take a place like Murrisberg. my home town: one hundred and forty thousand people; freight yards; slag heaps; slums and the oily smoke of a dozen factories. A Saturday night town, a brawling, hard-fisted town, where the mills hands and the freight-yard boys look on everything in the world with deep suspicion—with the exception of green money, hard liquor, fast cars and careless women.

Five days a week, the paper carries the figures which show the treasury balance. You get a local, down-at-the-heels, printer to make up a hundred thousand tickets each week; you sell them at two bits apiece. A ticket is good for a whole week, and there are five winning numbers each week. Your odds of hitting a winning humber are twenty thousand to one. The payoff is two thousand to one, except the Friday number; that pays four thousand to one. The dream payoff. A thousand dollars for a quarter.

And so I knew that the money on the cardtables was money that should have gone for groceries, or medicines, or interest on the mortgage, or payments on the car. Greasy bills slipped to the vendor with a wise look. "Give me four tickets, George. This week I'm going to hit."

And George, having learned the patter, says, "You hear about that guy named Baker ofer to the tool works? The son-of-a-gun hits a five hundred buck winner two weeks ago, and last week he gets the big one. One thousand bucks."

"Better make it eight tickets, George. Here's the two bucks."

IT STARTED in a small way in Murrisberg with a local group of sharpies, and then the syndicate came in and took over. It wasn't hard. The sharpies were small time. A few mashed faces and broken teeth and they were glad to have the state-wide syndicate take over.

The syndicate, which sent Brock Sentosa to Murrisberg, is not too greedy. They get the tickets printed up and sell them to the local distributor for thirteen cents each; that includes insurance on the big hits, the big winners. In Murrisberg the distributor was Johny Naga. His spread was three cents a ticket. Out of that he had to pay off the consolation prizes. Small winners. A dollar here, five there. The men who worked for Naga, distributing the tickets around

at candy stores, bars, cigar counters, made four cents a ticket. That left a nickel a ticket for the cut on over-the-counter sales.

So each week the treasury pool took in roughly $25,000—took it right out of the pockets of the mill hands. That is why, each week, Brock Sentosa counted up the thirteen thousand dollars. Naga got three thousand, the distributors got four and the candy stores knocked off five.

Each week I stood in the cellar with the automatic in the spring clip making a small bulge in my coat, while two other boys hung around upstairs. Brock Sentosa counted up the thirteen thousand, took out enough to pay the hits that had been made during the week—generally not more than two thousand—took fifteen hundred for himself. Out of which he gave me two hundred, the girls a hundred each and the boys upstairs a hundred each.

The rest was shipped to the syndicate. Taken to the syndicate by Brock, in person, driving the big black sedan one hundred and forty miles, to leave the dough in a very businesslike looking office in a large office building.

Both Anna Garron and Brock Sentosa had been sent in by the syndicate. The other girl, Joyce Kitnik, a heavy-thighed redhead, was a local. While Brock counted the cash, Joyce was over in the other end of the cellar, running the tickets for two weeks ahead through the fancy stitching machines sent in by the syndicate. The tickets are stitched into a double fold, and an end has to be torn off to open them up.

Brock counted out fifteen hundred in one pile, twenty-five hundred for the five winners that week into the second pile and shoved the rest down into a canvas sack along with his code report.

"Pay day," he sang out. Joyce giggled, as usual, and tucked her hundred down the front of her dress. Anna Garron clicked open her purse and stuffed the hundred inside. Brock gave me four hundred, two for me and one each for the boys upstairs.

While his back was turned, Anna Garron gave me a long, steady look. I knew what it meant. We both knew that our footing was dangerous, and that what we planned to do was unhealthy, though profitable. She was good. Brock would never have guessed, unless he intercepted one of those infrequent looks, that she felt anything other than contempt for me.

Brock picked up the two sacks, grinned at me and said, "Okay, Brian, let's roll."

"Look, will Billy be all right for this trip?"

He frowned. "Billy is fine but he's excitable. I'd rather have you."

"Okay," I said. "It'll be me. But the blonde stenographer is going to be sore."

He thought it over carefully. Then he smiled and said, "I'll take Billy. You see what you can find out."

I wanted to laugh in his face. Maybe if it hadn't been for those dead brown eyes, I would have risked it. I was surprised to feel a trickle of ice cold sweat run down my ribs. The blonde stenographer was Kit Robinson, and she worked in the D.A.'s Office.

I went up the stairs with him and, as he took the money out to the sedan, I paid off Billy Browne and Oley Gerraine. It was funny, but whenever I had anything to do with those two, I felt like a cop again. I felt like maybe my brother, Quinn, would feel.

Quinn and Brian Gage. Brothers on the Force. Large-sized laugh.

I HAD seen Quinn just the day before. He had been walking up Baker Street toward his house, Molly, the kids and the mortgage and the frayed easy chair where he could take off his shoes and move his lips as he read the paper

The crate was new. I had had it three days. So when I saw him, I pulled in at the curb about twenty feet ahead of him and lit a cigarette.

When he came alongside, I said, "Hello, Quinn."

He stopped, turned and walked heavily over to the car, put his big hands on the top of the door and looked at me with that infuriating combination of pity and dull contempt.

"New car, kid?" he asked.

"Yeah. Like it?"

"Well, it goes with those clothes, kid."

"It's nice not to hear that old leather harness creak when you take a deep breath, Quinn. How many years is it before they let you retire on ten dollars a week, Quinn? Not over thirty, I hope."

Quinn is me, with heavier bones, four more years, twenty-five pounds extra. I saw the dull red flush under his weathered skin as the words struck home. I guess he counted to ten. When he spoke he said gently, "I know you got a raw deal, kid, and. . . ."

"Hell, they did me a favor. I'm doing okay."

"I know who you're tied in with, kid."

"So do half the people in town; it's no secret. If you law boys get upset, you can haul me in and fine me and let me go. I can afford a fine; the maximum the law allows is two hundred and fifty bucks. isn't it?"

Then, for the first time, he got under my skin. He gave me a long, superior grin. He grinned even though his eyes looked tired. "Everything you've ever touched, kid, has turned queer. You figure you're a pretty bright lad. Well, when you get down to where you need eating money, you know where I live."

He turned and walked away. I was sorry the crate had fluid drive at that point. I wanted to rip it away from the curb fast enough to scream the tires. Three blocks further on I realized that I had been holding the wheel so tightly that my fingers were cramped.

He was a great one to get holier-than-thou.

The war had snatched me out of the state university after I had worked three years in the freight yards to get the dough to go there. I had to work while I was there, and the grades weren't too good. The army let me out so late, that I couldn't get in any place.

And big hearted Quinn, the big brother type person, had gotten me appointed to the force. I couldn't admit it to him, and I rarely admitted it to myself, but I had liked it. A corny thing to like, I guess—being rigged out in police blues, with a gun on your hip and a badge on your chest and a big glare for overtime parkers. Nearly two years of it. Well enough set so that Kid Robinson and I were beginning to talk about setting the date.

By then I was riding in a prowl car rather than standing traffic duty. At two A.M. one morning, I was driving and I had dropped Sig Western, my partner, at a drugstore to call his wife about something he had forgotten. While I was waiting for him, the motor idling, a car steamed through the intersection ahead, going at least seventy. I pulled out onto his tail, and managed to edge him over and forced him to stop up by the vacant lots near the edge of town. Like a damn fool, I forgot to give communications a buzz and tell him what I was doing.

I came back to the car, wishing I had Sig along, because I wanted to take the guy in. I never got a look at him. He got out and said something in a low voice, and then I leaned on the shoulder of the road. When I got up, I realized I was drunk. I stank of liquor. The wise apples in the car had knocked me out and poured me full.

I weaved and staggered back to the prowl car and tried to send in a call, but I couldn't make my lips fit around the words. I decided to drive the car back to pick up Sig. Halfway back the world took a big swoop and I slammed against a tree and blacked out.

My story stank as badly as I did. No license to give them. Drunk on

duty. Busting up police equipment. And out of the files they dug up the old case about when I was in high-school and another kid and I got into his pop's liquor and we were booked for busting street lights. That was all, brother. And so the cheery little city of Murrisberg owed Brian Gage a lot. I was out to get mine—all that was coming to me, and a little more for mental anguish.

I KNEW THAT I wasn't any better than Billy and Oley, the kid gunmen, but I still felt like a cop whenever I talked to them. They both had those little rodent faces, that way of keeping their eyes moving, that self-conscious foulness of mouth that they seem to need to feel like men. Yet I knew they couldn't even be hauled in for lugging weapons. Wallace Rome, attorney at law, had put pressure in the right places to get the licenses.

Billy climbed in beside Brock Sentano, and he backed the big car out into the dusk. I stood on the porch steps and watched it head down the street. Oley squeezed at a pimple on his chin with nails that he wore too long, and said, "How's chances a lift into town, Brian?'

"Slim," I said.

He shrugged. "Okay, okay," he said, and walked off down the street. He wore metal things on his heels, and scuffed as he walked.

I sat on the porch steps and lit a cigarette.. The dusk turned slowly to night and pretty soon I heard the heavy tread of Joyce Kitnik coming across the porch as the front door slammed. I knew what she was going to do before she did it, and my mouth twisted in disgust. She came up and stood beside me. Her leg brushed my shoulder and then she leaned the solid meat of her knee heavily against me. "Nice night, hah?" she gave me in husky MGM voice.

Joyce was okay, except that she had some highly exaggerated ideas about her own charms. I didn't answer; I just moved the glowing end of my cigarette close to her ankle.

She jumped back. "Clown!' she rasped, in her normal voice.

"Oh, sorry!" I said politely. She sniffed and clumped heavily down the steps and walked toward the bus stop. I knew that she was sore and I knew that she would try again.

When she had rounded the corner, I snapped the butt off into the grass in a shower of sparks, stood up and went into the house. I could hear the sound of Anna's typewriter in the cellar. According to the official records, Brock Sentosa ran a wholesale food business. He had a couple dozen cases of canned goods stacked in one end of the cellar to prove it. Anna kept the books and made out the state and federal forms, withholding and so on. According to the official records, I was paid forty dollars a week and she was paid twenty-five. That eased the tax situation considerably.

I went quietly down the stairs and stood in the shadows for a moment, watching her. I would have felt more at ease about her, if I could have learned more about her past. But Anna did little talking about anything except the future.

When I moved out toward the cone of light made by the hanging lamp, she looked up. It was typical of her that she didn't jump or look surprised. Her face showed nothing.

As always, I thought about the difference between her and Kit Robinson. Superficially, they were alike. Both tall, blonde, grey-eyed, with a faintly cool manner. But the resemblance stopped right there. Sometimes I felt toward Kit as though she were my kid sister; it was doubtful whether anybody had ever felt like a brother to Anna Garron.

"One more minute," she said. She turned back to her work, her white fingers flying over the keys, then took the sheet out of the machine, placed it in a notebook, carried the notebook over and locked it in a cheap steel filing case, and, on her way back, covered the typewriter and clicked out the light.

Her foot made one small scuffing

noise against the concrete, and then she was in my arms. There was never anything soft or warm or relaxed about her kisses. Her body became like a bundle of steel wires, and her arms tightened.

We stood together in the darkness and she said, "Afraid?"

"Not very."

"It's better to be afraid. Then you're more careful, Brian."

"We'll be careful."

Chapter Two



WHEN you have a complicated plan to doublecross a whole organization, the plan seems to divide itself into two phases. The first phase is when you do the planning, fit all the little cogs into the proper wheels, and rub your hands and tell yourself how good it looks and how well it is going to work. The second part is after the plan begins to roll and then you find that instead of you being the boss, the plan has somehow become the boss and you are carried right along with it with no chance to step aside or step out, even if you wanted to.

And part of it was that neither Anna Garron nor I trusted each other. The physical aspects of our relationship were like play-acting, like a smoke screen thrown up to make the other party feel that there was no chance of anything going wrong.

My angle was that I was tired of being a hired boy. For years I had been a good kid, full of confidence in the future, and it hadn't paid off. I knew that the kids I had gone to high school with, all the people I knew, were laughing at Brian Gage who couldn't finish college, who spent four years working up to be a pfc, who couldn't even stay on the cops, and who ended up as a hired boy for one of the rackets.

I wanted to stop that laughter, but quick. I was in touch with a little deal that was bringing in six hundred thousand a year—a million, when you count everybody's cut—and I was making ten thousand. With the extra dough I could make, I was going to buy respectability. I was going to invest in local businesses. I was going to marry Kit and buy a big house on the hill over town and they were going to point to me and say, "Brian Gage had a little trouble getting started....but when he did!"

That was the way I wanted it.

And the only trouble with the plan that Anna and I made was that she wouldn't let me in on all of it; she kept some of it to herself.

When she clicked the light on up in the living room, I glanced at my watch. It was quarter after eight. She brought the bottle in from the kitchen and poured a shot for each of us. I cut mine with water, but Anna liked hers straight. She smiled at me, tosed it of, and made a face. "Now to go out and get rumpled by that big clown," she said.

The big clown was Homer Windo, Jr. He was the son part of Windo and Son, Printers. They ran a dusty little print shop at the foot of Baker Street near the tracks. The biggest standing order in their shop was the weekly hundred thousand tickets for Brock.

I had seen Homer the son several times when it had been my job to pick up the weekly batch, to take them back to be stitched. He was a big, brown-haired guy with a white face, a huge firm jaw, and a surprisingly weak and petulant little mouth that was always moist and red. His daddy ordered him around the shop as though he were some sort of half-witted puppy. His big white hands were always stained with ink, and he usually had a smear of ink somewhere on his big wide face.

"Are you sure you've got him

hooked?" I asked.

"Don't low-rate my charms, darling,' she said. "To him, I am a poor but honest girl who is getting slave wages working in a dishonest business trying to get my weak, embezzling brother off the big hook. He got tears in his eyes when I told him about it."

"But will he come through?"

"Tonight I get the blank tickets. He'll have to wait for a chance to swipe the type and ink."

The tickets are printed on a press which is so aranged that each time it banks down, it prints a new five digit number. Homer Windo, Jr., was fixing it so that instead of printing on the face of the ticket, it would print on a hunk of cardboard, and then he was swiping the blank tickets, so that when the numbers came out, the wining number could be printed on freehand.

"That's a nice story you gave him, Anna." I looked into her eyes. "And what's the real story?"

"The witness refused to incriminate herself."

I got up and poured us fresh drinks. She knocked hers off before I could even pour mine. "As long as you think he's hooked..." I said.

"That big clown has been trampled on for years. This is his chance to put one over on the powers that be. Besides, he thinks that as soon as I collect on the tickets, I send some of the money to my brother and he and I run away on what's left. He wept on my shoulder and said that he'd even dig ditches for me."

"LET ME review the great plan," I said, sounding more calm than I felt. "One—you heard from Brock that there is internal trouble in the syndicate and they aren't as strong as they once were. Two—you have found some smart money around town that you won't tell me about, some person or persons who will back the new pool. Three—you get the fake tickets and print them up; I arrange for a chump to turn them in, for a small cut. Brock has to pay off; the syndicate men come down to investigate, and some blank tickets are planted among Brock's stuff. That gets rid of him. Four—I turn honest and give the whole deal to Miss Robinson, who feeds the information to the DA, giving him enough to set up a raid and knock over the house, the printers, the stitchers and pick up a lot of the less reliable salesmen. Five—then we get the new tickets printed outside of town and set up our own organization and we are in operation before the syndicate can do anything about it. And once we are operating, we don't let them scare us out."

"That in several nutshells, is it."

"And why don't you tell me who the smart money is?"

"Because then you would know, and if you were suspected and anything goes wrong, I'm quite sure that Brock could make you talk."

"You also speak Eenglish."

She stood over me, her hands on her hips. She said softly, "But I am also faster, tougher and more sure of myself than you'll ever be, Brian."

"It sounds as if you don't trust me."

"And that's my privilege, darling," she said.

I reached up and gently pinched her throat with my thumb and forefinger. Her eyes blazed. "And if you get funny baby, I have privileges too," I said.

But even as I did it, I knew it was to melodramatic a gesture; my bluff was showing. She slapped my hand away and said, "Get a cap-pistol, junior, and we'll play cops and robbers."

Half an hour later I dropped her near the small drugstore where she had arranged to meet Homer. As I drove away, I glanced back. She looked slim, young, lovely, under the street light; hate and greed wear fancy clothes sometimes.

I headed for Kit Robinson.

Chapter Three



IT IS an odd and lonely thing to drive down a quiet, faded street where the houses need paint, and the children, playing in the night shadows, make small hoarse sounds—and see, behind the familiar elms, the house where you grew up.

That room on the second floor on the side: Quinn and I had shared that room. Banners on the wall, and mechano set under the table by the window. And the quiet grey woman is dead; her big husband is dead; there are strangers in the house, and nothing is ever the same.

Except that Kit Robinson still lived diagonally across the street, and her house was still green with white blinds.

When I had still been on the force, I had been a welcome visitor. "Why, hello, Brian! Come right in. Kit'll be down in a minute. Oh, Kit! Brian's here, honey."

But then the papers had a little spread about a cop who got tight on duty; there was a picture of the mess I had made of the prowl car, and they had found me drunk, it seemed only fitting that I should spend a good portion of my time getting to that state again. I went back and worked in the yards for a time, but everything was sour.

Kit's father had ordered me out of the house, with Kit standing, white-faced, at the foot of the stairs, her heart in her eyes and tears on her pale face. And when I started to get next to the wise money, Mr. Robinson's mind didn't change. He had a pretty shrewd idea where the money came from.

I drove slowly down the street, turned in a driveway and parked in the spot we had decided on several months before. I knew that she was up in her room with the door shut, looking out her window toward that spot. Her window was the only one in the house which faced it.

I put my foot on the floor button and clicked the headlight beams up and down three times. I waited a moment, and did it again. Then I turned out the lights, slouched in the seat and lit a cigarette.

I could visualize what was going on in the green house. Kit would grab her jacket, saunter with great nonchalance down the stairs and say, "I'm going down to the corner for a magazine." Or cigarettes, or a coke, or some fresh air.

Maybe there's be a shade of suspicion in the air. Maybe not.

In the stillness I heard a door open, and close. High heels on wooden steps. Then her free stride, the heels clicking on the sidewalk. The tree shadows were dense where I parked. I saw her tall figure, and I leaned over and quietly opened the door on her side.

Seconds later she slid in beside me and the door chunked shut, not too loudly. Her warm arms circled my neck and her hair, the color of honey in the sun, and as fagrant, tickled my cheek while she said my name over and over.

"How long can you be out?" I asked.

"Maybe a half hour. Let's stay right here instead of driving around, Brian."

"What about the neighbors?"

"I'm getting sick of worrying about the neighbors; I'm getting sick of this whole thing."

"They making it rough on you, darling?"

"Every chance they get they slip in some sly remark about you, Brian."

"You know the answer to that one."

She sighed. "I know your answer. It isn't that simple. Come marry me, he says; leap right into the wild blue yonder, he says. What kind of a life would it be, Brian? Wondering from one minute to the next how long it will be before we get a call from the police."

I flushed with annoyance. It was

the same old song. "Maybe you'd like it trying to scrimp along on what I would be making as a cop. Look at Quinn."

"Molly is a happy woman, Brian. She works hard; there aren't many luxuries, but she's happy and secure."

I knew well the stubborn honesty of her, and I knew exactly what I was going to do. I had planned it enough times. What if I was lying to her? As soon as the doublecross had been accomplished, I would be making enough money to buy that respectability she prized so highly.

I made my voice stern and said, "Kit, we can't go on this way. We've got to come to a decision, and soon. Will you marry me?"

"If you get an honest job, yes," she said with a chill in her voice.

Maybe I hammed up the heavy sigh of resignation. "You win, Kit," I said.

Her face was a pale oval, her breath warm on my lips, "You mean...."

I PULLED the slip of paper out of my pocket. "Here. Take this. It's a list of addresses showing where a raid can knock off the stitching machines, the printer, the books, the supply of tickets, twenty of the route men and a long batch of over-the-counter outlets. As long as I have to get out of the business, I might as well do a clean job of it."

That wasn't too much of a lie. I wouldn't have the same job in the new setup; I'd have a better job. No hired boy stuff. One of the managers, with a salary to match. Nothing less than five times what I was making. Then I'd make them see my point. Hell, I'd even buy the house next door, set up an amplifier and drum it into them until they cried quits. And Kit would want that big house on the hill.

"Darling!" she breathed, and her lips were fresh and warm. Totally unlike the lips of Anna Garron, totally unlike anything else in the world.

Then she backed away. "But won't they....get you? Hurt you?"

"The list you got is typed on a machine they can't trace. Unless you tell, nobody will know. The D. A. won't make you give away your source. I'll even let them drag me in and I'll post my own bail and pay my fine when the case comes up. They'll never know."

"And then after it blows over, darling, I'll marry you right away. I can keep working and that'll give you a chance to find a really good job."

"Sure, sure," I said, and kissed her.

The plan was in motion, and Anna and I were being carried along on it. From then on, the plan was boss. No backing down. "Look, Kit. The right time for the raid is on Thursday at noon. Today is Friday. Tell them to hold off until then, or they won't get much. Okay?"

A few minutes later she slipped out of the car and I heard her footsteps going back toward the house. They seemed freer, happier footsteps than had been before. For a minute or two, I almost wished that what I had told her had been the truth. Then I remembered Brock stuffing those wads of currency down into the sack. No, my way was the right way; she'd see it, sooner or later.

I clicked the lights on, held my watch down so that the dash lights touched it. Twenty after nine. Plenty of time to line up Gulbie Sherman out by the tracks. I knew Gulbie since before college. He was ideal for our purposes. There was no danger of his getting wise and holding out on us, and there was no danger of his talking.

There are mammoth freight yards at Murrisberg. The yards themselves are enclosed by hurricane fence, and are floodlighted at night. But out on the edge of town, heading east, the number of track decreases. That end of town is pretty grim. The city dumps smoke endlessly, and the narrow asphalt roads are pitted with deep potholes. One road runs on a sort of ledge about ten feet higher than the tracks. From the road you can barely see the edge of the roof of Gulbie's shack. He built it of stuff he rescued from the city dump. It nestles down under the ledge and his door is about fifteen feet from

the nearest tracks. Right across the way is a semaphore.

As I pulled off onto the shoulder, a light rain started, dotting my grey gabardine suit. I cursed, turned the lights and motor off, slipped and slid down the steep narrow path. There was a flickering light in Gulbie's window I hammered on his door, and pushed it open.

Inside, the shack was just as I remembered it. Ten feet square, with a broken chunk stove propped up on bricks, rags stuffed onto the chinks in the walls; a broken down cot along the far wall, a lantern on a bracket over the cot.

Gulbie sat on the cot and looked up at me, his mouth open. He could have been wearing the same clothes I had last seen him wearing years before. On his bare feet was a pair of discarded overshoes. His once white shirt was greyish and ragged, and his dark trousers were held up with a length of rope. He hadn't aged a bit. His long knobbly face was like cracked red clay, his eyes a light and surprising blue, candid as the eyes of a child. His big-knuckled hands rested on his bony knees. As I had expected, he was just sitting. There was the smell of cheap gin in the shack, and a bottle, half-ful; rested by his hairy ankles.

There is only one thing wrong with Gulbie he can't seem to remember. As far as he was concerned, I knew he didn't remember ever having seen me before. Some little gadget was left out of his brain when he was put together. It had taken him all his life to establish the habit pattern of eating, sleeping and finding his way back to the shack when he leaves it.

But buried underneath the perpetual daze caused by his poor memory, he is keen. He taught himself to read. He trades off things he finds in the dump for eating money and gin money. The dump clothes him and houses him.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I SAT DOWN in the ragged cane chair opposite him and smiled. "You remember me, Gulbie. Jake Shaw. Hell, I haven't seen you for years."

"Jake. Jake Shaw. Sounds sort of familiar, at that. What you doing these days, Jake?"

"Making a fast buck here and there. I want to share some of it with my friends."

"Not buying anything," he said.

"And I'm not selling anything, Gulbie. Here, have ten dollars." I handed him a bill. He took it, looked at it suspiciously and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"Thanks," he said. "Who do I have to kill?"

I had some unsold, out-of-date tickets in my pocket. I took them out. "Know what these are?"

"Them green things? Wait a minute, now, I think so. Hold on just a minute. Yeah. Those are pool tickets, to win money with."

"Where can you buy them, Gulbie?"

"Why, down where I get my chow. Haiger's Market. I seen fellows buying them there."

"You want to make some more money, Gulbie?"

"Guess I don't mind if I do."

"What I want you to do, Gulbie, is buy some of those green tickets next week. Ten dollars worth. Understand?"

He nodded in a bewildered way. "I buy ten dollars worth. How do I make any money?"

"Don't open them in the store. Bring them back here and save them. I'll come around and open them for you. Then you cash them in; they'll give you a lot of money, Gulbie. I'll be around to remind you of all this. Okay?"

"How much do I make?"

"Maybe as much as fifty dollars. How does that sound?"

He smiled shyly. "Sounds pretty good, Jake. Yes sir."

I stared hard at him for a few minutes, making up my mind. Yes, Gulbie would do very well indeed. I could control him, and afterwards I could confuse him so badly that he wouldn't be able to tell anyone a thing about it.

His foot touched the bottle and tipped it over. With incredible speed he caught the neck of the bottle before a drop spilled. I had forgotten that animal quickness of his.

"Want a drink?" he asked politely.

He stood in the doorway as I scrambled up the path. I turned and looked back. The rain made red and green halos around the semaphore, and the tracks shone like silver. I could hear the stolid chuffing of the switch engines down in the yard, the clunk and rattle of the couplings as trains were being made up.

Back inside the car, I sat and smoked for a minute or two before turning and heading back to town. The big plan was beginning to roll, but I didn't want to be a chump; I didn't want that smart money Anna had found to ease me out before I was even in. Priority one was to protect myself from a cross within a cross.

I wondered if Johnny Naga could be part of the smart money, changing horses in midstream. Time to check. Johnny Naga collected his three thousand a week and paid off all the consolation winners.

* * *

I found him, as usual, behind his own bar, the outside neon flickering redly, repeating, "JOHNNY'S PLACE" over and over and over.

The bar was always packed with the squareheads from the neighborhood, largely a beer type business. In addition to backing the distribution angle of the pool, Johnny runs a baseball and football pool setup on the side.

He is a wide, redfaced man in his fifties, with a broad mouth. His head is the general shape of a pear with the little end of top. His voice is highpitched and when he giggles, which he does a great deal, his big belly jounces. He talks with a faint Slovak accent, as do most of the people in the neighborhood where his bar is.

There is more than enough dough laying around for Johnny to take it very easy indeed, but his favorite indoor sport is tending his own bar and kidding with the men he's known all his life and pretending that he's no better off than they are. But they all know that Johnny Naga is rolling in it.

I PUSHED my way into the bar, and he saw me immediately and gave a little jerk of his head toward the back room. I picked up a beer on the way and carried it back in there with me. The back room was empty. I drank the beer and put the empty glass on the table.

In a few minutes, Johnny came puffing back, wiping his hands on his white apron.

"How you doin', Brine?" he asked in his high voice. He can't seem to say Brian.

"Just fair, Johnny. What's new?"

"Brine, you know this Skippy Jorio?"

"One of the route boys, isn't he? Used to be a fighter?"

"That's a one, Brine. This week I got to put in his dough myself. He tell me to go to hell. Seventy-one bucks he owes, Brine. You get it?"

"Oh, fine!" I said in disgust.

"Brock, he says you help, Brine. Your job. Brock, he says one route man goes out of line, maybe all of them do."

I sighed. "Where is he?"

"Upstairs at [illegible]9 Fonda. With a woman. She gets the money I think."

The opening was as good as any. I said, "Sometimes, Johnny, I think we'd be further ahead if we ran this show ourselves and paid out the big winners and cut out the darn syndicate. Then we could afford to write off a lousy little seventy-one bucks."

He looked at me and suddenly he wasn't smiling. "Don't talk like that, Brine. Bad talk, I know. Don't mess with those boys. Out of town. Rough. You don't mean."

I gave him a close look. Either he was as good as Lynn Fontaine, or he was seriously jarred by my idea. I decided it was the latter. Scratch one prospect.

"I was just kidding, Johnny," I said.

His smile came back. "Good thing," he said, slugging me on the shoulder and nearly paralyzing my arm.

Before calling on Skippy Jorio, I made the usual precautions. It took me fifteen minutes to locate our local eagle, Mr. Wallace Rome. Finally I caught him at the Coral Club. Rome is one of those tall, swarthy young men with feline grace, a sunlamp tan, a small black mustache and startling white teeth. He has made a very good thing out of close-to-the-line practices, sucking up to the politicos, and playing the social game.

He answered the phone with liquid charm, and then shifted to bored irritability when he found out who he was talking to. "All right, all right. You don't have to draw pictures," he said. "Any trouble and I'll cover you. You're working for me while you make the collection."

"Don't forget to put all this on the bill," I said.

He hung up.

FIVE NINETEEN Fonda was in the middle of a row of buildings facing the freight yards. They seemed to lean against each other for support. A cheap restaurant, with white tile across the front, looked like a clean bandage on a dirty wound.

The way up was locked, but the wood was rotten and a little steady pressure tore the lock free. I went quietly up the stairs, crouched and listened at the door. A thread of light came from under it, and I heard a woman's drunken giggle. I backed up three steps, then hit the door with my shoulder. It crashed open and Skippy Jorio, in the act of pouring a drink, whirled, dropping the glass. A plump girl in a rather dull state of undress sat on a couch. She didn't stop giggling; her eyes were shut.

Skippy threw the bottle at my head, and came in fast. I sidestepped the bottle, yanked my gun free and slammed him in the side of the head as he reached me. Then I had to sidestep him; he tried to knock the side off the building with his skull.

Fatty still giggled insanely, but her eyes were open. I found some loose bills in Skippy's side pocket, and among them was a fifty and two twenties. Fatty stopped giggling when she saw the cash.

I took all he had and, as he started to moan, I went down the stairs fast, walked quickly to the car and drove away. Object lesson. The news would get around fast enough, thereby discouraging the next citizen who tried to hang onto the funds.

Johnny Naga took his seventy-one with beaming thanks and I tucked the collection fee into my wallet.

An hour later I was full of steak, and streached out on my bed in my room at the Murrisberg House, but sleep wouldn't come. Somewhere on the road Brock Sentano was headed back toward Murrisberg. Anna Garron was probably back in her room at Sentano's place, the blank tickets carefully hidden away. And somewhere, some monied citizen was licking his chops in anticipation of the riches to come.

The plan was rolling, and it couldn't be stopped. There was trouble ahead, but it would be trouble for somebody else—I hoped. I remembered the look on Quinn's face as he stood with his big hands on my car door. Contempt and pity. I'd show Quinn. I'd show them all. I began to think of myself as the biggest man in Murrisberg.

"See that fellow over there? Brian Gage. Owns a piece of the paper, and a couple of night spots, and a lumber mill and some garages and gas stations. That blonde is his wife. She used to work for the D. A. Wish I had his dough, by God!"

Then I began to make up a floor plan for the big house on the hill that I was going to build.

When I walked through the front door of that house, I was asleep, and the dreams were good. Except that, in my dreams, I seemed to feel someone watching me. Constantly. Every move I made....

Chapter Four



Saturday there was nothing to do. I went over and checked with Brock. He seemed carefree and contented. I didn't get a chance for a word with Anna. I tried a double-feature, but couldn't get interested; I tried a few drinks, but they bounced off.

After dark, I went and blinked the lights outside Kit's house. No response. I guessed that she had had to go someplace with her people. I was bored, restless and jittery.

Sunday was almost as bad, except that for a few minutes, while I drove Anna downtown at Brock's request, I had a chance to talk to her. She told me that she had gotten eight blank tickets from Homer and that he would steal the type face for the numerals on Monday and get them to her.

I tried to question her again on who was in the picture beside the two of us but she wouldn't talk. When I came back, Brock had had a call from Johnny Naga, and he complimented me on the way I'd taken care of the situation. Skippy had come around to Naga begging to be permitted to handle the tickets again, but Johnny had turned him down.

I told her about Gulbie, and where he was located. She said that it sounded fine. Then she crossed her fingers and added, "Brother, if this thing goes sour, I might as well move right in with your friend Gulbie."

I laughed, thinking of how she'd look in Gulbie's shack.

On Sunday night, the drinks didn't bounce. I had a few, and then took a bottle up to my room. By the time the level was low, I was ready for sleep. It hit me like a sap behind the ear.

The tension was growing. It was getting more and more difficult to act natural about Brock. I got so bored that I made a gentle play for Joyce, and she fell all over herself trying to back up my play. Billy and Oley got on my nerves.

Monday afternoon, in the kitchen of 1012 Cramer, Brock said suddenly, "Anything chewing on you, Boy?" I gave him my best grin. "Not a thing. There just isn't much to do the first part of the week, I guess."

He smiled and his dead brown eyes looked at me carefully. "Maybe it's something else?"

A small shiver ran down my spine. "What else?"

"Maybe you ought to be nicer to Oley, Brian. He got sore at you last Friday when you wouldn't give him a lift downtown. So he comes back when you go in the house again and Anna is there. What was that for?"

My grin felt wide and vacant. "We....we were just talking."

"You talk good with all the lights out, hah?"

"Oley's lying, Brock. You know me better than that!"

There was no humor in his laugh. "I don't know you so good, Brian, but I know Anna pretty good. Sure, I know Anna very good."

He turned and walked out of the room. That would be the payoff—to have the whole thing blow up in our faces, just because Oley had come sneaking back like a weasel. We had been careless. Suppose Oley had sneaked into the house, had heard what we had said. When I tried to find Oley, he wasn't around, and nobody seemed to know or care where he had gone.

To have Brock suspicious made things more difficult. Much more difficult. But not impossible. Once, walking back toward a beach through the surf, I had felt the undertow suck the sand out from under my feet. This was the same sort of feeling. The habitual smile on Brock's face had been familiar, but also familiar

was the dead, dull look of his tan-brown eyes.

I began to wonder if forging winning tickets was as necessary to our plan as we had imagined. We could figure on a profit of around two thousand dollars, which was unimportant compared with the advantage of having the syndicate take care of Brock, their own man, on suspicion of crookedness.

In the late afternoon the paper boy threw the evening paper up on the porch. I went out and picked it up, realizing that all over Murrisberg, eager hands were unfolding the paper, eyes were searching the columns near the back page, looking for the Treasury Report, the five digits immediately preceeding the decimal point in the treasury balance as of that day.

I smiled as I remembered having seen, in Molly's kitchen, while I was still on the force, a tiny pile of the green tickets. Even Molly was a sucker.

SUDDENLY the frame house on Cramer street was too small. Without a word to Brock, I went out and got in my car and drove away. I went out onto the open road and opened it up, the high whine of the motor and the roar of the wind doing a little to clean away the fear that had slowly seeped through me, down to the marrow of my bones.

Yes, the plan was rolling, and it didn't look quite as bright and shining as it had seemed. Anna had said the syndicate was having internal trouble. Maybe then, they would be particularly anxious to keep a firm hold on Murrisberg. The syndicate planned always on being driven out of business for short periods of time when the citizenry became aroused and sicked the law on the local operators. They also planned on opening up again within a very short period of time.

Anna had been right about Billy and Oley. Give them a hundred and a quarter a week, and their dubious loyalty would be shifted to the new organization. But how about the new talent that might come to town to do a little cleaning up?

Somehow that big white house on the hill was a little further away. I slowed, turned, went back to town and phoned Kit. She was guarded over the phone. and I told her to tell her folks that she was going to the movies with a girl friend. I wasn't afraid to be seen with her. It was Brock who had suggested that I see her often, so that I could possibly get a tipoff on any raid planned in the office of the District Attorney.

I sat in the lobby of the Murrisberg House, and soon I saw her walking across the tiled floor toward me. Tall, clean, young and very lovely. I stood up and I could see in her eyes all the promises of the things to come. I wondered how those eyes would look if she knew what I planned to do. "I've been afraid for you," she whispered, as I steered her out toward the car.

"I'll be okay, Kit," I said.

We had dinner at the Inn at Herperville, fifteen miles away. I thought of the few hundred dollars I had in my pocket and wanted to finish dinner and keep right on going, never come back. But such thoughts were weakness.

Over coffee she told me how the D.A. had reacted. He had said that it was a chance they had been waiting for. The chief had been in and she guessed that they had been going over the data, planning the Thursday raid. She said that they had been very difficult about her not disclosing the source of her information, and they had asked her several times if Brian Gage was the informer.

That gave me a serious jar. Of course they would figure that way. I began to wonder who had seen her meet me in the lobby of my hotel.

And I didn't like the taste of that word....informer.

I took her home and let her off at the corner and watched the proud way she carried her shoulders, the lift of her shining head, as she walked away from the car.

TUESDAY afternoon, late, as I passed Anna in the narrow hallway leading to the kitchen in Brock's house, she slipped something into my hand. I went out and sat in the car and looked at the two tickets. They were good; the alignment was okay. Two tickets, one for Monday's winner and one for Tuesday's. One thousand bucks.

I told Brock I was going to eat, and I drove out to Gulbie's shack. He remembered me after I had mentioned the name Jake Shaw, and the ten bucks. He was dirty and he had a bad smell about him; I winced as he sat on the clean new uphostery in my car. But I drove him down to the store, sent him in for the tickets, ten dollar's worth. That would make it look better. Forty tickets.

He came shambling back toward the car. Dusk was over the city. I pocketed the forty tickets, gave him the two counterfeit winners, and sent him back into the store, saying, "Now you stay right there and tell the store owner that you want your dough right away. A thousand bucks. Now repeat that."

"I give him these and stay right there and holler for the money. Right?"

"Right. And when you get the money, you hustle right back to your shack with it. Understand?"

"Okay, Jake. I get it."

He went off through the dusk, the absurd overshoes slapping the sidewalk. I saw him go inside, and I drove back to Cramer Street as fast as I dared. It was no time to pick up a ticket for speeding, or beating a light.

* * *

The tires squealed as I stopped. Brock was sitting on the porch steps in his shirtsleeves, a Martini in his brown hand.

"In a hurry?" he asked.

"No hurry. The crate's new and it likes to step."

The phone rang inside the house, and I heard the click of Anna's heels as she crossed the bare hall floor to answer it. "For you, Brock," she called.

He sighed and went in. Anna came out onto the porch. I didn't turn and look up at her. I could hear the murmer of Brock's voice.

He left the phone, and went back through the house. I guessed that he went to the cellar to get a thousand out of the safe.

Anna's fingers were chill as she touched the back of my neck. "Planted?" she asked.

"That was the call for the payoff."

"Good!" she whispered.

"How about your job?" I asked.

"I put three blank tickets in a crack behind a board in the back of his closet. One corner shows."

She drifted away, and the screen door banged behind her. Brock came out, bent over and picked up his drink. "Some lucky joker hit Monday and Tuesday already," he said. "Here's the payoff. You and Billy go on out there." He gave me the address.

Billy had a smell, too...but his was of shaving lotion, hair oil, and one of those male perfumes, cedar, pine, old leather. In a way it was as distasteful as Gulbie had been.

I pretended to have difficulty finding the place. Then I counted the roll, twenty fifties, handed it to Billy and said, "Go on in and check the numbers and pay the guy off."

Billy stuck out his chest. I guess it was the first time he had been

trusted with a big payoff. He strutted in. I waited and waited and waited. I tapped my fingers on the horn ring and shifted in the seat and smoked most of a cigarette. I was about to risk going in after him when he came swaggering out.

As I gunned the car and drove away, I said, "What took you so long?"

He giggled like a girl, but there was a nervous note in it. "Pull up by a street light," he said.

I did so. He took the roll out of my pocket and counted off eight fifties, four hundred bucks and handed it to me.

"What the hell is this?" I snapped.

"Don't get steamed, Gage. The guy who had the winners was sort of dopey. I had a last week's list with me; I pulled it out and held my thumb over the date and showed him his tickets were no good. Hell, this week's list hasn't ever been printed yet. Then I give him fifty bucks so he won't feel too bad. I tore up the tickets and give the guy who owns the store fifty bucks. That leaves four hundred for you and four hundred for me. We just turn the tickets I took away from him into Brock and we both keep our mouths shut. Okay?"

He tried to open the door fast and scramble out, but I got his wrist and yanked him back. As I pulled him back, I drove my fist into his face. He tried to get hold of his gun, but I turned his arm up behind his back until the bones creaked.

"Okay! Okay!" he gasped. I got four hundred and fifty out of his pants, put his gun in my pocket near the door, and drove back.

Gulbie was just leaving the store, a big package in his arms. I caught up with him, jammed on the brakes and stepped out. I made a motion as though I were giving him something, and said in a low tone, "Go on back to the shack and I'll see you later."

I was going to get back in the car and tell Billy that in this racket, you always paid off. But I heard running footsteps, and the right hand door of my crate was open. I caught a glimpse of Billy heading off into the darkness and then he was gone. I chased him in the car, but couldn't catch sight of him. Then I went back, picked up Gulbie, gave him a ride out to his shack, and went back to report to Brock.

* * *

WHEN I WENT in the front hallway, I could hear the mumble of voices in the cellar. I went back through the house and down the stairs. All the lights were on, and the thick curtains were pulled across the windows. The first thing I saw was Joyce, face down on the floor, moaning and twisting.

I stopped dead on the stairs. There were two strangers with Brock. Billy's gun was heavy in my left hand jacket pocket. I lifted my hand quickly.

"Don't try it!" a flat voice said.

The voice came from behind me. It was the sort of voice you listen to. I didn't move a muscle, or turn. A hand snaked the weight out of my left hand pocket, reached around, patted the front of my jacket, slipped inside and pulled out my automatic. The spring made an empty click. "Now go down the rest of the way, and back over against that wall. Keep your arms spread and our palms flat against the wall."

After I turned, I saw him. He had crisp white hair, and a soft narrow face. His eyes were like deep holes in soft dough. His hair gave him the look of age, but his face was oddly unlined.

Brock sat by one of the cardtables. He smiled and said, "Brian, meet Whitey. He's...sort of a troubleshooter."

I forced a smile. "Trouble isn't my name."

He ignored me. The other two men were staring at me. One was of the Billy-Oley breed, young, sneering, hard on the outside, soft in the middle. The other was tall, hefty, florid—looking like a bank executive, or a construction equipment salesman.

In a cheery, deep voice, the big man said, "You must be Brian Gage. Brock has told us about you. I'm Mark Fletcher."

The name meant something to me. I had heard it several times. From Brock. The big gun of the syndicate. The man in control; Mr. Fix with the authorities.

"Hello, Mr. Fletcher."

Whitey stood and merely looked at me. He was the reverse of the Billy-Oley type. Soft on the outside, and diamond hard under the skin. He had a perpetual look of sadness, quiet grief.

Joyce sat up. Her face was puffed with tears. She looked at Brock and said, "You shouldn't a let him...."

"She doesn't know a thing," Whitey said softly.

"Get up and go home, girl," Fletcher said, "Forget this little....unpleasantness. I'll authorize a small bonus for you, say two hundred and fifty?"

The look of naked greed dimmed the hurt and pain on Joyce's face. "Gosh!" she said.

"Run along now," Fletcher said in a fatherly manner.

Joyce gave me a quick look of contempt and stumped up the stairs. Seconds later I heard the distant slam of the front door.

I STOOD WITH my hands flat against the concrete wall. I thought of all the men I had seen in the police lineup. They let the silence add up.

"You had to get smart," Brock said wearily. "And I thought you were okay."

"Smart?" I asked. "How?"

Whitey took two slow steps toward me. Fletcher said sharply, "Hold it!" He circled Whitey and stood a few feet in front of me, his thumbs stuck in the bottom pockets of his vest. "You're a smart looking boy, Gage," he said gently. "And I understand you can handle yourself. Both of those things are advantages, you know. We were beginning to trust you, too."

Inside of me the fear grew like a swollen boil—and then it broke, and when it went away I was once again clear-headed, able to figure angles. "It would help a little," I said, "if I knew what you were talking about."

Fletcher sighed in an elephantine manner. "I am talking about a young man who fell under the spell of a vicious woman. I am talking about a young man who is too big for his pants."

"I still don't get it."

"My boy, part of our efficiency as an organization is the result of employing constant checks and balances. In the employ of the syndicate is a humble stenographer in the police department. Through him we learned this noon that a certain Miss Robinson in the District Attorney's office has turned in a rather complete report on the operations and organizational setup of this Murrisberg branch. They plan a raid for the day after tomorrow.

"I immediately brought Whitey and young Cowlfax down here by private plane to talk the situation over with Mr. Sentano. It is obvious to us that you gave the information to Miss Robinson. Then we wondered why; we could not imagine why you would wish to disrupt your own income for a period of a few weeks until we could get back in operation at some new location. Mr. Sentano remarked on your recent attraction to our Miss Garron.

"He also remarked on your behaviour lately, which, at the very least, has seemed odd. We have discussed this matter, and it seems likely that you and Miss Garron could hope to improve your positions through the setting up of an alternate organization which would replace the syndicate here in Murrisberg.

"I know of no outside organization interested in this city at the moment, so I am assuming that you two have found local backers and....ah.... local gunmen to protect you from us during the starting period."

He paused and smiled fatuously at me.

I didn't answer, so he said, "Mind you, we are not ones lightly to give up a source of income which nets us around four hundred thousand a year. You were stupid to believe that we would give it up without a fight. A very....ah....dirty fight, I might say. A fight in which we would be glad to....murder someone as an example."

He turned and beamed at the young punk. "Cowlfax here would be glad to do a job for a price which includes immediate transportation to a pleasant tropical country where they do not practice extradition, wouldn't you, Jimmy?"

"Sure," Jimmy mumbled.

"And so you see, my dear Brian, your premise was false from the beginning. However, we are prepared to forgive and forget. Does that surprise you? Yes, forgive and forget. Merely give me the names of your backers, and those in your organization, and we will keep you on, but switch you, of course, to some other part of the state, and, I am afraid, at a reduced income, my boy."

"Why are you so certain of all this?"

His eyes widened. "Why because of Miss Garron, of course! She is....ah....clever, and we were asleep at the switch, you might say. When she saw my arrival by taxi from the airport, she comprehended immediately and....fled."

Denial would bring Whitey in on me. There was something rabid and unclean about Whitey, something about the way his fat white fingers worked, and his look of sadness. I needed time more than anything.

I smiled at Fletcher. "Assume for a moment that you are right, Mr. Fletcher. And make the further assumption that I am a hired boy, with Anna Garron bossing the job. Would I know as much as you expect me to know?"

He rubbed his big chin and looked reflective. "You make a point, sir." Then he smiled broadly. "And would it not be equally wise for you to pretend to be a hired boy, as you call it, so as to prevent Whitey from working on you a bit?"

That angle had failed to pan out. I thought it over. A denial would bring Whitey in on me. I had learned during the war that torture is a great deal more effective than the average man would like to believe; and Whitey had the same look that the fat Jap in charge of the water cure had at the Rangoon Prison.

I gave Fletcher a frank smile. "Okay, Mr. Fletcher. You hold the cards. You've read them right, believe me." I looked beyond him, and said, "Sorry, Brock."

Fletcher turned around quickly. Brock was pale. "He's being wise, Fletch."

"Am I?" I said. "How about those fake tickets to help with financing us, Brock. Hell, you've got the blank tickets up there in your closet behind that loose board. You said that we might as well chisel a little out of the syndicate before everything blows up. Remember, Brock?" I tried to look the part of outraged innocence.

Fletcher nodded at Jimmy, said, "Last room on the left at the end of the upstairs hall."

Jimmy ran up the stairs. The cellar was very quiet. Brock's face began to glisten in the overhead lights. "He's lying," he said. Oley, sitting back in the shadows near the canned goods, shifted restlessly. I hadn't noticed him before.

Jimmy came back down, a wide grin on his face. He handed the green tickets to Fletcher. Fletcher looked at them curiously.

"I don't know anything about those!" Brock said loudly. It sounded like the voice of guilt.

FLETCHER, his voice odd and husky, said, "I'd give this kid another chance, Brock. You've been with us too long to get a second chance. Okay, Jimmy."

Brock scrambled back, his chair tipping over, his hand flashing inside his coat. Jimmy's gun had a massive

silencer screwed on the end of the barrel. It's report was halfway between a cough and a grunt. It was a big gun, with a lot of foot pounds of impact. It smashed Brock against the wall. He bounced off the wall in an odd and comic dance and fell awkwardly across the tipped-over chair. He lay with his forehead against the concrete floor.

Fletcher said softly, "You can see, Gage, that you have been on the wrong side."

"That wasn't smart," Whitey said in his half whisper.

"What do you mean!" Fletcher snapped.

"Maybe he knew more than Gage, or the girl."

For the first time, Fletcher looked uncertain. His eyes were puzzled. He turned to me. "Where is Anna Garron?"'

"I wouldn't know. Brock and Anna were running this show." While I was talking I was trying desperately to think of a likely backer. Not John Naga. Somebody else.

Oley still sat over by the canned goods. I could hear his rapid breathing.

I said calmly, "Oley over there was to knock off you syndicate people when you arrived; that was the plan."

Oley gasped as Jimmy whirled at him. He scuttled away toward the darker shadows. Whitey was watching him. "No!" Fletcher roared.

Whitey was half crouched. I took one quick step and kicked him in the face with all my strength, feeling the jaw bone give as he fell heavily. The fuse box was half under the stairs. I put an arm lock on Fletcher and kept him between me and Jimmy. I yanked him back toward the stairs, as Jimmy stood in helpless indecision.

I yanked the black handle down, shoved Fletcher away and broke for the stairs. The gun coughed again, slightly louder this time through the worn packing, but I didn't hear the slug hit.

I slid on the kitchen linoleum, skidded into the stove, bruising my hip, and then found the back door handle. I vaulted the railing, stinging the soles of my feet on the asphalt of the driveway.

I slid into my car, found the ignition lock, turned the key and roared it up into second before I clicked the lights on. Once around the second corner I slowed down.

The plan was shot, but maybe we could save some of it. If I could find Anna.

Chapter Five



I DROVE aimlessly through the night streets of Murrisberg. On a hunch, I called my room at the hotel. Where would Anna Garron go?

Maybe she'd hide under the wing of the law. Legal talent. From a diner I phoned Wallace Rome's apartment. After a long pause, he answered the phone. Charmingly.

"This is Brian Gage."

"Oh."

"Has Anna Garron contacted you?"

"Should she have?"

"Don't fence with me, friend. The whole deal has blown up."

"Indeed?" he said politely.

"Brock is dead, and the out-of-towners know about the raid, and if they can get Anna, they'll cut her heart out to find out who's backing a big doublecross."

I heard his gasp distinctly.

"Now will you tell me if she's contacted you?"

"Not yet, Gage. Keep in touch. Let me know if you find her." He hung up.

A cool article, Wallace Rome. Very cool. He might turn out to be a friend in court. And then again....Well, they hadn't taken my money. Over a thousand dollars on me; that might buy his services.

Trusting the speed of my car, I went back to the vicinity of Cramer Street, and began to hunt around that area. I parked in the shadows by a neighborhood theater and, on a hunch, paid my way in and made a careful search. No dice.

In a telephone book I found the home address of Homer Windo. I

went there. I parked down the street, walked across the soft grass and peering in their windows. The two of them were in the living room. The old man had his eyes shut and Homer, Jr., was reading to him, out of a confession magazine. Anna wasn't there.

I began to wonder about Billy. Maybe he had an idea. I drove out to the store where Billy had queered the Gulbie payoff, parked and went in. An old guy with a white stubble on his cheeks and chin was nearsightedly checking the cash register tape.

He looked up as I strolled over. I dug out a ten, folded it the long way and perched it, like a little tent, on top of his meat case.

"What you want?" he asked.

"Nothing. That's a present."

He reached over and took it, snapped it between his fingers and put it in the cash register. "Been getting free money all day. Got a ten from another fella real early tonight."

A ten. And Billy had said fifty. "You remember him?"

"Sure. Face like a pantry rat and a little yella bow tie."

"That's him. He been back in?"

"Nope. Haven't seen him since."

"I thought he might have come in to call a cab or something."

"Nope. Say, old Gulbie's pretty popular tonight. First that ratty looking one come out to see him and then a woman."

"What!"

"Sure. Damn fine looking woman too. Got off the bus right across the street there and come in here and asked me how to find him. Told her it was about a mile up the road and she'd have to watch sharp or she'd miss the path."

"How long ago was that?"

"Hour and a half, maybe two hours. Yes, she made a phone call first and talked so low I couldn't hear a thing and then she asked me about Gulbie and away she went. Told me not to tell anybody she'd been here. Then she gave me five dollars. You gave me ten." He chuckled. "Been a good day, all right. I figured you wanted to know about her."

"What made you think that?"

"Well now, don't get sore. But you and that ratty fella and that girl. You all got the same look. Kind of shifty look."

I glanced at my watch. Ten fifteen. I slammed the door as I left. Behind me he pulled down the door shade and clicked out some of the overhead lights.

LOOKING up the road toward Gulbie's, I saw headlights which seemed to pull away from the shoulder on his side. They came booming down on me, taking up more than their half of the road. I jolted over onto the shoulder, with a smack of shocks against frame and was so busy that I couldn't even try to look into the other car. Maybe it had been my imagination that it had seemed to leave Gulbie's place.

It was then that I seemed to hear Anna's voice, cool in my ear. "If this thing goes sour, I might as well move right in with your friend Gulbie."

Of course! That's what she had said. And things had gone sour, and, hoping I'd remember she'd gone there. A good place to wait for protection—better than going directly to one of the unknown backers—if there were more than one.

Cautiously I drove by Gulbie's, parked two hundred yards beyond, finding the ground firm enough to get it well off the road and over behind a line of brush.

No cars were coming from either direction.

I got out onto the asphalt and ran. As I neared the shack I saw the first tongues of flame shoot up into the night air. I scrambled down the bank. Spreading from the broken lantern, the flames had crept up one wall and had burst through the flimsy roof.

Gulbie was sprawled awkwardly on the floor, his pebbled red face cradled on one arm. The black rubber overshoes were bubbling near the flames and smoke was rising from them. The room was empty except for Gulbie. Shielding my eyes from the heat with my forearm, I ran in, got hold of Gulbie's limp wrist and dragged him

out. As soon as he was outside the door, I got under the armpits and hauled him a good twenty-five feet from the roaring, crackling flames.

His body felt warm, but I thought that it might be from the flames. I believed him to be dead until he moaned. Then I saw the welt over his ear, the fresh blood on his cheek. I slapped his face and shook him.

He opened his eyes then, squinted at the flames and cursed weakly.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded.

"I don't know. I can't remember."

I shook him again. "Remember, damn you!"

He sat up and moaned. "I came back here....let me see. You brung me back. Then some young fella comes in and talks and he hit me, right here on the chin. I think that's right. When I come to, the whole inside of the place is tore up and what's left of the money is gone." He covered his eyes. "I can't think. I can't remember."

"Try hard, Gulbie."

"Well I'm cleaning up the mess he made, he comes back and asks me where I hid the money. He has a stick and he's going to hit me again. He's a mean one. Then the woman comes, I think."

"What did she look like?"

"Yellow hair. Black dress, I think. She yelled at the young fellow and he yelled at her. They talk about things I can't understand. He says something about a double-crossing woman. Then he hits her."

"What!"

"He hits her a good one, right across the temple. She falls down hard and he laughs and runs out. I sat there and looked at her and all of a sudden it come over me what happen to me if anybody comes and finds her there. You know what they'd think and suppose she should die or something. She doesn't seem to be breathing so good. I'm remembering it better now, Jake."

"Keep going."

"It's going to be a bad thing if anybody finds a pretty woman like that in my shack, and I don't know what to do with her. Then I remember a place across the tracks where I can take her and she'll be hid behind the bushes. The ground is wet, but it ain't a cold night. So I grabbed her by the arm and started to drag her across the tracks and put her over there. Nobody goes over there; then they won't connect me up with it if she maybe dies."

"And then what?"

"I can't remember any more. Just a noise behind me, I think."

THE WHOLE roof had gone, and the flames jumped high. If Anna was across the way, I had to find her. The tracks were brighter then just the firelight could have made them. I didn't see the Cyclops eye of the freight engine picking up speed on the far track as it came out of the yard; the noise of the fire had obscured the sound of the engine.

Gulbie's hard fingers bit into my arm. "Look!" he gasped.

I looked where he pointed. One slim leg across the shining steel rail, the slim body face down, the far rail under her chest.

I pulled loose and started to run. The loose stones of the roadbed turned under my feet and I fell heavily. I got up, dazed, and ran two more steps before I saw that it was too late.

The engineer had seen her. The brakes grabbed and the big steel wheels locked and the sparks showered back.

I screamed with all the power of my lungs, and turned my back. The thundering locomotive went on, interminably. The next half hour was disjointed....unreal. The world was like a room reflected in the broken bits of a mirror, and I walked blindly.

There was the screaming siren.... floodlights on the destoyed shack.... men in fireman's hats....a train over on the fourth set of tracks.... halted...men standing quietly, shining lights on something wet and horrible midway between the trucks of the third freight car. Gulbie's twisted red face appeared in front

of me, and then seemed to spin away to one side. Rain touched my face as I walked down the road, and then I was sitting in my car, foolishly holding the steering wheel, and I couldn't think whether it was Kit or Anna who had been out there, sprawled across the hard and shining rails. Kit or Anna. Kit or Anna.

Someone shouted as I went back by the fire engine. They hadn't bothered wasting chemicals on the insignificant shack.

The tires of my car made a wet and sticky noise on the asphalt, and the lights of the city grew more frequent around me. The fizz and sputter of cheap neon.

DINE AND DANCE
COCKTAIL LOUNGE
LEARN TO DANCE
ALL LEGAL BEVERAGES

Something deep inside of me was sour, old, tired. Something broken and something blue.

Maybe there was a white house on a hill for somebody. Not for me. Brian Gage, the sharpie, the angle-boy, the rough man with the hard fists. Something had happened to him. It had happened in the grind of steel on steel....

Then, without knowing how I had come to be there, I was standing and facing a door that was oddly familiar. I looked numbly at it, and then realized that I would have to ring the bell. I pressed my thumb hard against the bell, heard the distant sound of its ringing.

A LIGHT went on and the door opened. I staggered forward and Quinn's hand was warm and strong on my arm. "Kid, are you tight?"

"No....I....Let me talk to you."

The bright kitchen lights stung my eyes. I shook my head slowly. Quinn was wearing the old grey robe that I remembered. My voice sounded like the voice of a stranger, and it told of things that seemed already vague in my mind. I finished and there was nothing more to say.

Quinn looked at me, and his eyes were doubtful, questioning.

"Is this another of your bright angles, kid? Is this another power play?"

I looked him in the eyes and shook my head slowly. "That part is all over, Quinn. All done. I'm....I'm going away, I guess."

They became cop's eyes; firm and hard and cold. "You'll come up and stand where I can watch you while I put my clothes on. Then we'll go to headquarters."

His hard hands slapped me, looking for a gun. I leaned against the bedroom wall while he dressed. Molly held the covers up around her chin and looked at me with wide and frightened eyes.

Quinn drove my car. I walked beside him into the familiar building. The lieutenant had grey pouches under his eyes, and he sipped his coffee as Quinn put my disjointed remarks in some sort of formal order.

The lieutenant was brisk. He asked me a few simple questions. Then he clattered the cup into the saucer and said, "Okay. That gives us enough to go on in the case of Sentano. You've given us the name and the description."

"He'll be gone," I said.

"Maybe. And maybe Fletcher will be dumb enough to keep him around for another job before sending him on his way. But you heard Fletcher give the order?"

"Yes."

He pushed down the switch on the communications box on his desk and spoke to the radio room.

"Send everything loose to 1012 Cramer. Homicide. A. and D. Pick up four men." He gave the names and descriptions. Fletcher, Whitey, Oley, and Jimmy Cowlfax. Then he put Billy on the tape for immediate pickup and asked for another car to pick up Joyce Kitnik.

The call on the death of Anna had already come in, and a detail had been sent out there.

"What's your angle?" the lieutenant asked me.

Once again, I shook my head. "No angle. It just....made me sick."

The lieutenant grinned up at Quinn. "I'm surprised more of these boys don't develop weak stomachs."

Quinn gave me a hard, unreadable look.

"Who killed Anna Garron?" the lieutenant asked.

"I don't know."

"And maybe you do know. Maybe you knew she could queer you and you got there in time to see this Sherman character dragging her across the tracks. You sapped him, saw the freight coming, left her on the tracks and dragged Sherman back and set fire to his place and claim to have dragged him out."

Once again, the lieutenant looked at Quinn. He emptied out my pockets and put all my stuff on the lieutenant's desk. He poked at the money with a lean finger, yellowed with nicotine, and whistled softly. "That's enough for a garden variety murder in your league."

"I didn't do it," I said dully.

"Then who did?"

I shook my head to clear it. It was hard to think clearly. Slowly I said, "Maybe Billy."

"No," the lieutenant said. "We've had him in here plenty of times. I know the kid. He's rotten all the way through, but without the guts to kill."

"Anna called somebody from that grocery store."

The lieutenant smirked. "The mysterious moneyed man who was going to back the pool? I give up. Who is he and why would he knock her off?"

I began to grow exicted. "Sure. Can't you see. Whoever he is, he was afraid that Fletcher would get to Anna and make her talk. Then somebody like Cowlfax would be sent after him. Anna was his only link; if she were killed as soon as the whole plan blew up, nobody would ever be the wiser."

The lieutenant pursed his lips. "Maybe—and maybe not. Anyway, it gives him a better motive than you, and we can assume he has more killer instinct than Billy."

A uniformed man I didn't know with rain on his blue shoulders came to the office door and said, "The Doc says she was alive until the train hit her. He figures it from the way the blood spurted." He made a grimace. "A hell of a waste of a good-looking woman."

The lieutenant put his lean fingertips together and looked up at the ceiling and said, "Too bad we can't paste her together and use her as bait. If this man here is leveling with us, the killer drove off in a car after putting Sherman back in the shack and busting the lantern, Then, until the killer reads the paper in the morning, he can't be sure she's dead, although he's almost sure—that is, if he saw the freight train getting up steam down in the yards on that track."

Something about his use of words made me feel ill. Bait. Plaster her together. If I had not happened along Gulbie would have been pegged as the murderer....

Half to myself I said, "She looked like Kit."

"Who's Kit?" the lieutenant asked, frowning.

Quinn answered for me. "Catherine Robinson, the blonde who works in the D. A.'s office."

"It might be worth a chance...." he said slowly.

I TRIED to object, but neither of them would pay any attention to me. I tried to tell them that Kit looked nothing like Anna Garron. The lieutenant got hold of Captain Jameson, and with his approval and his authority, after Kit had agreed by phone, the managing editor of the only morning paper was awakened and persuaded to kill the death story which had already been locked in the press.

Between them, they gave it a new look. Anna Garron had not died; she had been pulled practically from under the wheels of the locomotive; she suffered a superficial head injury and had been taken to Mercy Hospital for treatment and would be probably released early the following day. She was not yet recovered sufficiently to talk about her experience.

I was in "protective custody."

But the front page space on the morning paper didn't go to waste. There was another story to fill it. Replace a murder with a murder. Brock Sentano. Dead in an empty house. Gambling ring killing. Principals sought.

I walked back and forth in the small basement room at headquarters and cursed myself for having mentioned Kit's name. This was nothing for her to be mixed up in, even as blonde bait. Sometimes the bait gets snatched off the hook while the fisherman takes time off to yawn.

It was two o'clock in the morning. The trap wouldn't be set until the morning papers hit the street at six. Even if the cot in the corner had been the most comfortable bed in the world, I couldn't have slept.

Quinn had dropped in to tell me the progress. Yes, Kit has agreed. They had checked with the D. A. She hadn't wanted her family to know, had told them that it was special stenographic work. They had smuggled her into the Mercy Hospital.

"Clothes?" I asked.

A dress had been found which was a close match to the one that had been ripped and cut by the steel shoes. No, a change in hair style wasn't necessary. The bandage would take care of that. Miss Garron's face hadn't been damaged, and the greatest similarity was around the mouth and nose.

So it was intended that the bandage would cover one eye. And then they decided, at least the lieutenant decided that I was needed. Quinn took me out to the black sedan and I was rushed to the side door of the Mercy Hospital taken up to a room on the second floor.

Kit stood there, the bandage covering her fair hair, one of her grey eyes. They had told her about me.

"The plan is this," the lieutenant said. "The paper hits the street at six. At eight thirty, Miss Robinson leaves by the out patient door. She walks to the curb, stands there a moment, then turns and heads up the street toward the taxi stand. She walks slow. We have the block covered with everything we've got."

She didn't look at me. The lieutenant had her walk and asked me if it was okay. "No. Kit carried her head too high and her shoulders too straight. Slump a little and take shorter steps."

Finally she got it right. She held a big red purse similar to the one half-destroyed by the fire in the shack.

"Good luck, Kit," I said.

She didn't answer me.

I STUCK close to the lieutenant and he seemed to forget that I was someone in 'protective custody'. In his mind I had become a part of the home team, and it made me feel warm and good to be so considered.

Before daylight, the lieutenant, Quinn, Captain Jameson and I entered the small florist shop across the street from the out patient door. We moved some potted ferns into the window which would conceal us. In high windows across from the hospital men from the department checked the bolts of high-powered rifles.

At eight a car stopped near the door and two men leisurely began to change a soft rear tire. At either end of the block, department men loitered.

And at eight thirty on the dot, Kit came out of the door across the street, out into the morning sunshine. At one hundred feet, the illusion was perfect. It was as though Anna Garron walked out toward the street. It gave me a sick feeling in te pit of my stomach.

At that moment the plan seemed futile, the trap empty, the whole idea childish and absurd. If Fletcher was still in town, he would try to grab her. Before the unknown backer tried to kill her, to kill the woman he had already killed....

She stood for a moment at the curb. I could see that her face was very white, her lips tight under the dark lipstick in Anna's shade.

She was a clay pigeon, fragile and yet priceless. She was all the days

of my future, standing alone and unprotected.

Suddenly another figure came out of the hospital door. The lieutenant cursed softly. In explanation he said, "Wallace Rome, the legal eagle. He'll foul things up. He knew Garron and he knows Miss Robinson."

Suddenly my mind was working with speed and desperation. Wallace Rome. Something was wrong, horribly wrong. What had I said to him over the phone? Something was missing in that conversation. Of course! I had mentioned the raid. He should have immediately said, "What raid?" But he hadn't said it. He should have said it, but he didn't.

Kit had not heard him. She turned to walk slowly down the street.

"Maybe he won't notice her," the lieutenant whispered.

As I looked, Wallace Rome casually slipped his hand into his jacket pocket. I grabbed a potted fern and threw it through the plate glass window of the shop. Kit turned startled eyes toward the direction of the crash.

As the lieutenant reached for me, I shook his arm off and hurried toward the door. Wallace Rome had crouched; he pulled his hand half out of the pocket and I saw the gleam of metal.

A rifle spoke with an authoritative crack, and Rome staggered back. His white teeth shone. Kit, as she had been instructed, dropped flat. Rome aimed the weapon at her and car brakes screamed as I ran directly across the road.

There was only one thought in my mind, and that was to somehow get between Kit and the muzzle of that gun.

But two rifles spoke together and he coughed, dropped to his knees, and folded slowly over onto his face. Men ran toward us from all directions. Kit got up and I grabbed her in my arms. She was shivering and I was saying silly and sentimental words over and over....

And then she pushed me away.

You can't live on the wrong side of the fence without paying. And I am paying. Oh, the other deal is all washed up. Fletcher was picked up, along with Cowlfax, in Miami. I turned state's evidence and saved my own hide.

But the months go by and I keep paying. I live with Quinn and Molly now, and I'm a brakeman in the yards. The big-shot dreams are gone. I'm just an average, beaten-down guy.

Quinn is working to get me back on the cops, but it is an uphill fight. He may never make it.

He keeps telling them that I, in effect, supplied the trap, and I was the only one who caught on fast enough to save Kit. Rome was the money boy, and the one Anna had phoned. Yes, he was going to shoot, and take his chances. Maybe he had some out figured; he didn't live to tell it.

But Kit distrusts me. She may never forgive me for the way I lied to her. That is my payment. Quinn has lost that expression of contempt, all there is left is pity.

Pity for a guy who got too big for his pants and tried to buy the world. I can keep going because I hope that some day she will forgive and relent. Now I can afford to wait. Some girls have to have hill-crest houses. All Kit has to have is trust and love. And that's all I'll have to give her.

THE END

Just Around The Coroner

By Rex Whitechurch

(Author of "The Hobgoblin")

A man who's just passed a rigid examination for increased life insurance doesn't suddenly pass out from heart failure — not without a little assistance, that is.

THE TALL police captain shifted his cigar from the right corner of his mouth to the left, and the prong of his two fingers hooked to it. "We don't want anything from you, Doc, but the cause of death. If you'll kindly—"

Old Dr. Samuel Sampson put his black satchel on the sidewalk. He struck a match on the seat of his pants, held it to the cigar that dipped downward at an aggressive angle from his toothless gums, sighed and stared over his spectacles at the towering cop. It was a bright early spring night; patchy clouds drifted lazily over the moon; the languid breeze was just crawling around, and the flowers growing along either side of the narrow walk to the front steps of police headquarters were fragrant and gave promise of being big flowers some day.

"H e a r t," Doc said amicable. "Thrombosis. It could happen to anyone, but this man has been having trouble with his heart for some time. Nope, it's just a case of death from p l a i n and natural causes; a blood clot stopped an artery."

The police captain said to a little police sergeant, "Get the cadaver to the morgue. That's where you want it sent, ain't it, doc?"

"Sure, city morgue," Doc said. He sauntered over to his car. It was of ancient vintage like some rare old wine, but it looked youthful with a fresh coat of bright g r e e n paint. Still, it was a relic; it was like Dr. Samuel Sampson.

The dead man lay on the wide sidewalk, face up, the moon shinning on him. The gentle southeast wind seemed to be crooning a lamentation over his well made immaculately-attired figure. He hadn't reached forty yet.

I knew Clinton Allerdice. Who didn't know him? He was the big chainstore druggist; he had twenty stores to look after; he had five hundred people working for him. His name was in twenty garish neon signs. ALLERDICE. And his widow (yeah, she was his widow now) was one of the prettiest young women in Mason City.

The taxicab driver was excited, but he managed to keep fairly cool. "He insisted on being fotched right here to the pol-ice station, and him tighter 'n an Injun drum."

Things like that happened; we were used to them. I'd seen Clint stagger from the checkered cab, topple to his knees. He hit the walk like a squash. The windows were up in my office on the second floor; I was looking down on him. Sounds travel far on a silent spring night. I stopped Doc Sampson with my voice. "Doc, you old humbug, if you weren't the coroner I'd swear you'd made a mistake. He acted like he'd been poisoned."

I reached the car, but Doc wasn't going to wait. He tramped on the starter. "Biff Johnathan," he rasped, "you ain't human. You're always thinkin' of puttin' somebody in the pen for life or the big pig-tank at Jeff City. I'm sorry I can't accomodate you this time. Clinton Allerdice just up and drunk hisself to death."

The coroner's verdict. I let Doc go, heard his cavorting flivver take off like it had wings and a propeller, stomped back, then, up the broad steps with the green lamps blinking



. . . Edyl showed up at the morgue

at me, thinking of what Doc had said about the "Pig Tank," the police term for the lethal gas chamber. Yeah. I'd put four men there, and two women, and if Clint Allerdice had met with foul play, I'd put another killer there. When I entered my office the phone was ringing on the desk.

A SOFT voice said, "Biff, this is Edyl. Dr. Sampson says Clint is dead, that he fell dead getting out of a taxi in front of police head-

quarters. I'm all broken up, of course; but I must have more of the details—"

"Doc says it was his heart," I stated. "He'd been drinking. I'm sorry for you, Edyl. Is there anything I can do?" Something gripped my throat. I'd known Edyl a long time, had gone to school with her. They said she'd wind up in Hollywood. She was the cleverest kid we could find to play the leading lady parts in our school plays. She had beauty and talent and a way with men. Take Dr. Paul Meadows, my close friend; he was still in love with Edyl, although she'd been married to Clint ten years. Paul Meadows would never get over it.

"Take it easy, kid," I said. "You take it easy and don't crack up. I know how hard it is to do; but it won't help Clint any to break down." I gripped the phone hard, cold sweat running down my face. The sweat stung like points of little pins.

Coldly, with a hint of more strength than I was capable of showing, Edyl Allerdice said, "I understand, Biff. I'm shocked, of course. I suppose I'm bound to crack up. But—wait a moment. Roger Maine wants to speak to you."

Roger Maine's voice was deep, coarse. "It's too bad, Biff. You do what you can. Will you please tell me how it happened?"

I told him.

* * *

For a long time I sat there in my pine-walled office, saw them load the body and haul it away. The moon was softer now, the shredding clouds had passed it by. It was more like a flirting eye seen through a grey veil; but it was full, round and clear now, with all the demure sleep gone from it. The breeze whispering through the open window, stirred papers on my desk. I chain-smoked cigarettes. It was hard to make a decision; I didn't have anything to go on.

I reached out, got the phone and carried it to the window sill. I called Paul Meadows, wondering vaguely if he were relieved that Clint was dead, if he'd try to win Edyl; he'd loved her so madly, so awfully long. "Why, his heart was sound, Biff. There wasn't a damned thing wrong with Clint's heart."

I phoned Clinton's club, learned he'd taken three highballs, nothing beyond that. He'd called a cab. He'd waited about twenty minutes before it had arrived. "I noticed one thing," the club steward said, "Mr. Allerdice had a severe headache."

"See him take anything, aspirins for instance?" I asked.

"Oh, sure he was taking aspirins. He asked for a glass of water and took an aspirin just before he went away in the cab."

Still, I wasn't satisfied. I walked out of the office, down the steps. The front door was open. George Kelly stood there in his shirt sleeves, gazing up at the moon and smoking a pipe. George Kelly was one of our best homicide men.

We stepped out on the landing and sat down, in the glow of the twin green lamps. George was worried, and he waited for me to speak.

"George," I said, "I've known Clint Allerdice thirty years. He didn't have a bad heart. I've seen him in the gym, playing golf, riding horses at the horse show, everywhere, and he never complained of having a bum ticker. Doc Sampson—"

"Now listen, Biff," Kelly said, "I know exactly how you feel. Sure. You're suspicious. The circumstances don't stack up so well; I know it. I could see it if I was blind. But damn it, Doc's the coroner. What he says goes. He claims Clint's heart stopped on him. Although Doc looks like an old buzzard and has a high, shrill voice, he's an excellent medical authority. We know it, and I'd advise you to come down off your high homicide horse."

Just the same I sat there turning the thing around and around in my mind. The newspapers would muffle the tone of the drinking part of it; the story elements, however, were sensational. Clint had ordered the taxi driver to haul him to police headquarters. The reason evaded me. Clint had climbed out of the cab, had taken one long stride and dropped to his knees, on the sidewalk. He'd

rolled over, grasped his stomach and died before any of us could reach him.

"Why do you suppose he wanted to come here?" I asked, with something drumming in the back of my head. "If he felt so rotten, why didn't he go home?"

"Doc Sampson says he was drunk." Kelly flicked his cigar away, got up. He was short, solidly built, had black hair and intense dark eyes. He was square of jaw, grim, looking. He patted me on the back. "We'll have to take Doc's word for it," Kelly said. "But if you need me, Biff, give me a ring. I'm on my way home to the wife and kiddies.

I'M NOT much of a drinker, but I drifted over to the Rendezvous on Edmond Street, and bought a bottle of ginger ale. I saw Roger Maine sitting in a booth, and he beckoned to me.

Maine was tall, strongly made through chest and shoulders. He wore a dark business suit, rimless spectacles. His blue black hair shone in the lamplight. He was rather good looking in too smooth a way.

"Tell me how it happened?" His voice was nervous. "I left Edyl right after I talked to you. I called Doc Sampson a moment ago. He's been Edyl's physician for years."

I hadn't thought of that. Briefly I explained how Clint had dropped dead in front of the station, that I'd seen him fall down, from my office window and turn over like he was in extreme agony. The coroner had pronounced it death from natural causes.

"I don't suppose there's anything else to it," Roger Maine said. "Doc Sampson's word is final and conclusive. He's familiar with the case. Clint was warned to stop drinking, but he persisted in getting plastered. He'd begun to aggravate Edyl."

"But," I said sharply, "Sampson wasn't Clint's physician, and he wouldn't have known about his physical condition."

"Paul Meadows was Clint's doctor." Something dark flashed into Maine's face. He shut his eyes, swallowed hard. "Did you call Paul?"

"Yes," I admitted. "Paul said there wasn't anything wrong with Clint."

Maine eyed me strangely, compressed his lips. He was Clint's former business partner. Clint had bought him out, but they'd continued to be close friends. "There's nothing you can do, I suppose; the coroner's verdict settles it."

"Not if Clint was poisoned, it's not ended," I snapped. "We can always demand an autopsy. If there's any traces of poison, we can launch an investigation."

"Poisoned!" He stopped pushed a hand over his mouth, evaded my probing eyes. Definitely something had come over him. He was having trouble shaking it off.

"Well, no matter what you think," he said coldly, "Clint's death was due to heart's disease."

"I don't know that it was," I said obstinately. "In my business we don't take anything for granted; we can't afford to. Clint was heavily insured. He kept increasing his insurance, was always acceptable to the company, despite the rigid examinations he was forced to undergo. When a man's got fifty thousand dollars life insurance and asks for more, they put him through a stiff test, believe me. If there had been anything wrong with Clint's heart, do you suppose they would've passed him?"

At this particular moment the barmaid came to our table, dropped a handful of change in front of Roger Maine. "Here's the money you wanted for the juke-box," she said. "I'm sorry I've been so long getting back here—"

"Thank you." Maine's voice was husky, full of nerves and mean little anticipations, perhaps of embarrassment, or so it appeared to me. He knew I wondered how he could play a juke-box, with one of his best friends a corpse on a slab four blocks away.

I politely excused myself, went home.

I DIDN'T try to see Edyl. I avoided Doc Sampson. I think Doc ex-

pected to hear from me, for he'd called my office early in the morning. I hadn't reached headquarters yet. I'd stopped in to see Dr. Paul Meadows.

We sat in his office in the Corby Building and discussed Clint's death. We'd all been friends, such good friends. In our school days they'd called us Tom, Dick and Harry. We were just about inseparable. None of us played football, but we were ardent fans; we'd never missed a Harvard game. Paul and I returned from Harvard about the same time. I'd forsaken law for the job I now held. I'd made a study of criminology, and in five years had achieved assistant chief's chair.

I'd doped out a plan. Paul followed me to the door. "You can count on me, Biff," he promised. "I'll handle it all right."

I called on Doc Sampson. He was located over the Empire Bank Building on Edmond Street. He was in his shirt sleeves, wore his Spanish-American war jacket, which he often did when not receiving patients. He'd been perusing the morning edition.

"Well, Punk," he greeted me, addressing me by the nickname he was responsible for. I entered his almost barren reception room. Two chairs and a desk half submerged in riff raff composed the fixtures of his consultation room. In the back was a foul smelling dispensary. Over the ancient desk hung a steel engraving of Abraham Lincoln. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Clinton Allerdice's murder," I said, stomping into the conference room and sitting down in the spare chair.

He peered at me over his spectacles. "What in name of Hob you driving at?" he demanded. His proud, austere face showed startlement. He was thin, bent and sharp-geared, like an aged buzzard. His shirt had iron marks on the bosom of it. There were innumerable corrugations in his forehead. "Listen, Punk, you challenging the verdict of the Mason County coroner?"

"I am," I said bluntly. "Now look, Doc. Look at the steel engraving over this desk. It's Abe Lincoln's picture. You idolize him; you think he's the greatest president this country ever had, that he was the greatest citizen of his day. Yet, don't you know Honest Abe never went off half cocked, never hurried a decision, and always investigated everything that ever came up before him to the limit of his endurance? Don't you know the Great Emancipator always changed his mind when he found he was in the wrong, regardless of what humiliation he must have felt? Sure, you can't help but know of those sterling characteristics, Doc, but you've never tried to get anything out of the noble example he set for others. You hurry matters too much. You don't give them the time you should; your decisions are sometimes faulty. Now in this case you've got to perform an autopsy on the body, to be safe. If not, you'll leave yourself wide open to a stain you'd never erase from your record. And what man can afford to risk that?"

It was a lengthy speech, not embellished with the oratorical elegance it needed, perhaps; I'd made just plain simple statements which he listened to, with his head cocked on one side, his eyes narrowed and not seeing anything, only what was in his mind.

He got up slowly, ironically, his expression enigmatic. He stood backed up to his desk, fingering a brass button on his blue jacket. I could see all that pride and haughty strength he was known for, in the cut of his chin and the tilt of it. "Punk," he said amicably, "I ought to get mad at you; I ought to cuss and lambast you, maybe order you out of this office. But I'm not the kind that does them things. You demand an autopsy on the body of Clinton Allerdice. You do so because you smell a mouse; you think Clinton Allerdice was poisoned. Okay. I'm calling your hand. We're going to slip silently over to the morgue, and stay there until we do as Abe Lincoln would've done, find out the true and might cause of a human being's untimely demise. But

—I warn you—I warn you, Punk, if I'm right about his death being due to thrombosis, then you've got to buy me a new suit of clothes, and not the kind they throw at you in a haberdashery."

DOC SAMUEL Sampson was definitely and irrevocably wrong. In the stomach of the deceased was sufficient strychnine to cause the sudden and violent death of two men.

Doc didn't express an opinion. He remained sternly and imperiously noncomittal, but that chin came out just an inch further and an inch higher. Vainly I sought to persuade him to tell me what he knew about Clint Allerdice's murder; I felt he knew something. "You've been victim of an ingenious deception," I said quietly. "You've heard stories of how Clint had a bad heart, how he persisted in drinking after he'd been warned to stop. Damn it, Doc, you know good and well you were tricked, and tricked because, when you were told those things, the killer was getting ready to strike. He was paving the way for a successful job, for a perfect, or I should say, the perfect crime."

He peered at me over his spectacles. The little muscles stood out in his jaw like steel ballbearings. That haughty chin came out a wee bit farther. I'd never seen any little man look so damned imperious.

We stomped up the iron staircase from the morgue's gloom-shaded basement. Sweat stood out on the old man's grey face; over that craggy face hung a somber veil. The lab door closed on Doc's assistant; the body of Clinton Allerdice was returned to the iced crypt in the wall of the giant storage room and the silver handle was motionless. We'd heard the rumble of the rollers.

I didn't stay with Doc. It wasn't hard to see he didn't mean to talk. His pride stood in the way; Doc Sampson wasn't a good loser, not where his pride was concerned.

* * *

I drove to Edmond Street, located the taxicab chauffeur and questioned him. "Sure," he said, "my fare took something out of a small tin box. Maybe it wa. an aspirin. I figured he had a headache, thought it funny a guy as tipsy as he appeared to be would take aspirins. But you don't get no two fares alike. He never said anything after he downed the pill or whatever it was, but it wasn't long till he was acting like he was having a chill. He kept urging me to hurry."

I requested the guy to stay where we could get our hands on him, and then drove back to the Corby Building to see Dr. Paul Meadows.

"Well, Biff, I found out what you want to know," he said. "Edyl says Clint took out another insurance policy, this for ten thousand dollars. I don't happen to be that company's examining physician, but I do know Clint was in excellent mental and physical condition. We know the insurance policies call for double indemnity in case of accidental death. Somehow those pills got mixed up in his aspirin box, and—it was an accident!"

Paul towered over me; he was straight, square shouldered. He had a long, pale face; his eyes were blue and cold. In his starched white jacket his soldierly bearing was more pronounced. I remembered how shocked he'd been when we'd heard Edyl had run off and married Clinton Allerdice. On the verge of total collapse, Paul had been unable to work for days. He'd stayed single, never looked at another woman. I knew he had Edyl's photograph concealed in his desk where he had but to slip open the drawer to steal a look at it. Somehow this honed his bitterness.

"Paul," I said, "Clint's death was not an accident. Those aspirins were removed and strychine substituted. He was deliberately and premeditatedly murdered. One grain of strychnine is adequate to cause death in a man. We found about two grains were taken by Clint, and he must've been deathly sick."

THE PHONE rang. Paul crossed to a teakwood chest in the ornate reception room, lifted the instrument off the standard. He merely grunted monosyllabic answers until

something was said that obviously disturbed him. "I tell you absolutely no," he rasped "Certainly not; That won't do. Yes—I intend to tell them everything, if they ask me." He slammed the phone down, stood with his back to me, his fingers pressed to his lips, thinking.

"Who was that?" I vociferated. "What're you going to tell—if they ask you?"

I suppose I'd known him so long, and we'd been such good friends, I figured in the back of my mind I could get away with it. I'd taken a percarious chance, but it worked.

Irritably Paul said, "I don't want to get messed up in anything, Biff, but I have my professional honor to consider. The man who phoned just now doesn't know anything about the autopsy. He asked me to use my influence to keep it from happening. He wanted me to withhold certain facts from the reporters and—the police!"

"What things?" I didn't hurry, but deep within me I was all jangled nerves and fast pumping blood

"About Roger Maine—he—" Paul hesitated, held to the tapestried chair behind which he stood. He inclined his head. "Roger Maine wanted Clint to let him buy back into the firm, but Clint refused. Maine claims he had promised to let him back in any time he decided he wanted in. But until the war Maine didn't see how big the drug business was, and he begged Clint to sell him his share of the stock back; Clint refused which brought about a lot of bitterness. He threatened Clint, but they patched up their quarrel and seemed to be getting along. Roger was a frequent caller to his home, and liked Edyl. She liked Roger, too, but she mistrusted him."

"And now," I said eagerly, "Roger Maine called you to ask you to prevent the autopsy from being conducted. Why did he call you?"

"Because," Paul said soberly, "I've recently become his physician. We were pretty good friends. He told me all about his trouble with Clint; and now because he threatened Clint, he is simply afraid of being accused of the crime, and he's afraid of you."

"He'd better be," I said, "if he's guilty. What do you think?"

Paul shook his head, looked worried. "I don't know," he said, "but it's worth looking into."

ROGER MAINE and Edyl were at the morgue. I took George Kelly with me. We whipped Roger over to headquarters, left Edyl behind. George was an expert at grilling a suspect. He suggested we hold Maine for further investigation, since the former druggist admitted he'd once threatened to kill Clinton Allerdice

I phoned Doc Sampson. The coroner wasn't in. His wife couldn't tell us where he could be found. We decided to hold Roger Maine.

"We'll sure pay for it, if we don't make good," Kelly reminded me. "We're playing with the atomic bomb. As yet we've established not an ounce of proof against him; just his threat to kill Clint. Suppose Clint did die because of strychnine poisoning? How we going to prove Maine responsible for his death? How we going to prove, for example, that Clint didn't commit suicide?"

"He had no reason to kill himself," I said. "Besides, if he'd even thought of such a thing, why'd he ask the cabby to bring him to the police station?" Yeah, I was banking a lot on this unexplained action on Clint's part—maybe too much.

It certainly looked far from promising on our side of the fence. Desperate, fearful of failure, but as determined as ever we stuck to our clubs and guns. George Kelly had a lot of guts.

I walked down the stone steps to Roger's cell. He gripped the black bars and glowered at me, his eyes haunted. "You phoned Paul Meadows," I said; "you begged him not to reveal what you'd told him about your trouble with Clint, that you'd threatened to kill Clint because he wouldn't sell back to you your share in his firm. Last night, with Clint on a morgue slab less than four blocks away, you were about to

play the juke-box."

His eyes were hard, gleamed like dull steel. He slued around, stood with his back to me, head lowered, fumbling with a cigarette. "You're a sucker for a smart story, aren't you? They always said you were a great detective."

I figured the lysol in the plumbing was making him sick. That cell was next thing to a Medieval torture chamber. "Why don't you come clean, Roger? If we have to do all the work, you'll get no breaks."

He skewed round, rolling the unlit cigarette in his fingers. "Okay," he said, "I was going to play the juke-box. I hated Clint. I was envious of him, he was making a fortune out of what I'd started and hadn't had brains enough to continue. I started that chain store deal, you know, let him buy in with me. He wouldn't sell back to me, but he promised when I quit if I ever wanted back, he'd let me in. That was before the war, and when he began to make a killing, he forgot his promise. He wanted to hog it all. Sure, I said I'd kill him; I was mad as blazes. But I didn't do it; nor did I talk to Paul Meadows. He lied to you. Why don't you go back there and ask him why he lied? I'm not sore at you, Biff, for locking me up —but you'd better check Paul Meadows."

I looked at him a moment. The lines were deep in his face. His mouth was a thin hard line. I turned on my heel, briskly left the bull pen. That lysol would make a dog sick.

BACK IN my office I learned Doc Sampson had phoned. I took George and drove swiftly to his office in Edmond Street. His face looked taut, greyer than ever, but his chin was still thrust out defiantly, aggressively.

"Okay, Punk, I've got most of the work done for you. That strychine came from Paul Meadows' office. Don't ask me how I found out; that's a state secret." He tossed a small pill box on the desk, labeled Dr. Paul Meadows, strychnine. "Took that out of Clint's coat pocket. I reckon Meadows made him believe his heart was bad, and they'd entered a conspiracy to defraud the insurance company, or something."

I was sorry to hear that, felt gloom saturate my brain. Paul had been my pal. "Who told you Clint had a bad heart?" I demanded. "It wasn't Paul Meadows; he wouldn't've been so dumb—"

"No, it wasn't Paul. It was—er—" His face clouded, his eyes shifted around the room, came back to rest on mine. "Maybe you'd better go and ask Edyl. She was always telling me about his bad heart; yet I learn he passed the physical examination for a new insurance policy, going before another doctor, not Meadows. So—there couldn't've been anything wrong with Clint's ticker."

I sent George Kelly back to headquarters, wanting to face Edyl alone.

I DROVE out to Clint's big stone house on Ashland Avenue. The red mansard roof was cheerful in the

spring sunshine. I walked down a path lined with bright flowers. When Edyl let me in she had her right hand behind her. She backed away, and I followed, stalking her.

"You're going to jail, darling," I said.

She retreated across the elegantly appointed living room. She knocked over a screen made of a leopard Clint had shot in the Belgian Congo. She kept backing away from me until she was in the Queen Anne bedroom. A large canopied bed stood in the middle of the floor, nearly filling the small interior.

"You're not afraid," I jeered. "You're not afraid of the chair darling. Of course it's not a nice thing to think about. How could you turn out this way, baby? You, of all people—the girl we were all crazy about, the girl Paul Meadows was willing to go to hell for—you a murderess—"

"Stop it, Biff! Stop it or I'll—"

Out flashed her hand. In it was a small automatic. Her hand was steady—a pale, delicate hand with murder in it.

"Why didn't you use that on Clint?" I said. "It would've been more merciful."

She fired, the bullet spinning me around. The red reflection blinded me, and powder singed my face. I was bleeding when I grabbed her, and my left shoulder felt numb. I thought she'd get the better of the argument. She swung the gun hard, squarely in my face. I was sure she'd broken my nose. A thousand sky rockets shot out in front of me.

I hurled her across the bed. We tore down one of the bed's yellow silk curtains. I shoved her face into a pillow. She flailed hard with her smooth bare legs, and spiked me with her long heels. I had held her there until she'd subsided. I knew she couldn't get her breath, and both of us were covered with blood that dripped from my wounded shoulder and my face where she'd hit me with the gun.

Then she started begging. "Let me up, Biff. I can't breathe. I killed him. I told Paul Meadows I wanted the strychnine, and he gave it to me without asking me what for. I found I could influence Paul. I figured, too, that Roger Maine would be suspected, if anything came of it, because he'd threatened Clinton. But I didn't think it would ever be found out that my husband died that way. I'd built everything up, telling Doc Sampson I was worried because Clint's heart was bad. I kept telling him that, so he'd not go too deeply into the investigation when Clint died. I am to blame. I killed Clinton, Biff—"

The night she went to the chair, I talked her case over with Doc Sampson. Edyl was interested in the movies. The hometowners had always figured she'd go places as an actress. Clint had been too old for her. She was still young enough to make a career. She would have a fortune to make fate dance for her. It was a stiff temptation for a young woman without scruples, and certainly she didn't have any scruples. And the next day we learned she'd disclosed her motive for the murder before going to the gas chamber, to the lethal chair and the little poison pill.

"I killed him because I never loved him. I wanted to make good as an actress and he held me down. I thought I could commit the perfect murder—"

She'd damned near accomplished her purpose, too. Roger Maine was forgiving, didn't complain because he'd been incarcerated as a suspect.

I saw the guy in the Rendezvous at midnight, a few minutes before Edyl went to her death; he was playing the juke-box. It sounded good to me, and I stood around and listened. I saw a weird picture of a man driving a taxi-driver into great speed to reach police headquarters because he'd suddenly discovered that his wife, the girl he'd loved and trusted, had poisoned him. Yeah, that juke box surely did sound beautiful to me.

THE END



Coming Next Issue

A Brand New "Jigger Moran" Novel
by the author of
"There Are Dead Men in Manhattan"

Moist eyes searched Jigger Moran's face, then Professor Scott nodded slowly. Jigger resumed, "Sally Woods was an alias assumed by an heiress born Susan Hunter. Her home life was a sordid story of a tyrannical father who perverted her natural development, plotted to steal a fortune bequeathed by her grandmother, and manipulated her into marriage with a pathological cousin. From all that, she sought to escape. That's why she took up as Sally Woods here in New York."

Scott was listening raptly, believingly. He said, "It explains a great portion of her writing for me. There have been clear allusions to just such conditions as you have described. A father is strongly hinted, over and over again."

Jigger said, "Good! I was hoping to wring some clues, something of real help, from those writings. With his daughter gone, Matthew Hunter, the father, circulated news of her death, carying the hoax even to prima facie certification and burial procedure. Undoubtedly, he sought to find her and kill her—whenever and wherever he could.

"The girl was deathly afraid to return home, afraid to assume her identity. I know that she was in telephone communication with her father not long before she was killed, and I also know the father knew where she was living, under the name of Anne Brown."

Scott said clearly. "That fits in with another exercize of hers—at last. It was a conflict of decision and fear."

Jigger nodded. "You told me that our first time together and I remembered it when the girl's aunt spoke of a recent phone call. The girl undoubtedly wanted to go home, wanted to expose the cruel hoax; she probably found the courage to threaten that she would just before she was murdered."

"Her father, then, murdered her?" There was a shiver in Scott's tones.

don't miss

DEATH BE MY DESTINY

by John Roeburt

It will appear complete in our January, 1949, issue
on sale at all stands November 1st

No Parole for the Dying

★ ★ ★

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

(Author of "Man in the Shadows")

It takes time to cut a man's throat, and Lucian Drew was waiting for someone to come and kill him, waiting with a hair-trigger gun in his hand. He couldn't have been taken by surprise — yet, he died without shooting his murderer. And Walsh knew that the answer to this riddle held the secret of who had slain old Drew.

DETECTIVE Lieutenant Dick Walsh spoke into the phone. "You're kidding. Lucian Drew wouldn't call me if there were six tommy guns pressed against his back and I was the only man who could save him."

The cracked voice that came over the wire seemed to be Lucian Drew's; even Lieutenant Walsh had to admit it. The voice said, "You've got to come. Nobody is playing a joke on you, Lieutenant. Yes, I swore I'd get back at you some day, but a man grows wiser as he grows older. My life is in danger. You have the nerve and the ability to save it."

Walsh said. "Well, you're a taxpayer and I'm a public servant—so I *can't* refuse. I'll be right out, Mr. Drew."

"Hurry," the old man said. "I'm upstairs in my study, sitting here with a gun in my hand and I won't move or let anyone near me until you arrive. Hurry! Please! Whatever I thought of you or said about you in the past was all wrong. I've been a fool, but don't let me be a dead fool."

Walsh hung up with one hand, reached for his shoulder holster with the other and slung it into place. He dropped flashlight and sap into their respective pockets threw on his coat and picked up the battered grey hat from where he'd dropped it on a chair.

He ran to the police garage and he ran fast for, though Lieutenant Walsh was flirting with forty, he was as agile as a man half his age. Tall, too, powerfully built and fast with fists or gun. The grey in his hair was a completely deceiving scheme of nature.

He used the siren to get out of town, but cut it when he was a mile away from Lucian Drew's home. It wasn't exactly a home so far as its outward appearance went; it had a closer resemblance to Grand Central. An English type house. Drew had spent a fortune on it. The rooms were immense and there were a lot of them. There were gables all over the place, even above the front porch, and ivy grew up the walls. The estate was spotted with trees of all kinds and the lawn was sweeping, closely knit and well tended. A ribbon of concrete drive curved up to the entrance. Walsh braked the car to a stop and got out.

The man who let him in was of medium stature with a pleasant face and a smile of greeting. He was Willis Fairchild, once Lucian Drew's ward and now regarded practically as his son. Fairchild had mild blue eyes and features regular enough to put him deep in the handsome class. His handshake was warm and firm.

"What on earth brings you here,



Walsh knew who he would be facing before he saw the man's face.

Lieutenant?" he asked. "I really thought I was seeing things when you came under the porch light. Now wait —it must be official business. Nothing else would cause you to visit this house. You'll be jibed at, scorned and brow-beaten perhaps, by everyone but me. I'll do anything I can to help you."

"Thanks," Walsh smiled. "You always were a good sort, Willis—the only one of the whole bunch who took my side three years ago. Mr. Drew phoned and asked me to run over, quickly. I know that Jed Gardner was released from prison with the last twenty-four hours so he must be what has the old man so excited."

Fairchild nodded. "Jed came home late last night. He's still resentful, especially of you. I'll try to—ah—keep him out of your way. Go right upstairs. Mr. Drew was in his study last I knew."

Walsh walked into the house. There was only one man in the enormous living room: a two-hundred-pound fashion plate named Paul Drew, the only son of the old man upstairs. Paul Drew's hobbies were simple: sleeping and eating. He was lumbering to his feet, but Walsh had no time for him. He hurried upstairs.

The door to the study was closed. Walsh knew where it was. He'd been in there several times before, taking the brunt of the old man's lashing tongue. He knocked on the door. There was no answer so he tried the knob, pushed the door open and froze in the doorway.

WHATEVER OLD Lucian Drew had been afraid of, he'd done no exaggerating. He was lolling in a chair, looking poised and neat even then. Though the whole front of his clothing was blood-soaked. His eyes were wide and staring with the strange look of the newly dead as if they were ready to light up in recognition. On his lap rested both hands. One held a heavy pistol, old-fashioned perhaps, but capable of delivering a terrific wallop.

His throat was slit from ear to ear.

Lieutenant Walsh closed the door behind him slowly. He walked over to the dead man and first of all glanced at the desk in front of him. It was bare of any sort of papers. He looked for the murder knife and saw no signs of it. He backed away slowly. The lid was off now all right. There were few men as important as Lucian Drew.

Walsh left the room and went downstairs. Willis Fairchild was in the living room with Paul Drew. Walsh sat down. "Before I begin a lot of explaining," he said, "I want to know a few things. Where is Jed Gardner now and where was he within the past fifteen minutes?"

Willis said, "There's something wrong, Lieutenant. I can read it in your eyes. Tell us!"

"Where is Jed Gardner?" Walsh repeated.

Paul Drew said, "I don't know. This place has been in an uproar ever since Jed got home. I wish they'd given him forty years. I think he's wandering around the estate somewhere. Said he was going to take a walk; that was at least half an hour go."

"All right," Walsh said. "Where have you been, Paul?"

Paul waved at an open book and a tall drink on the table beside him. "Right here, for more than an hour."

"And you, Willis?"

Fairchild looked at Walsh, turned his glance toward the stairway to the second floor and started to get up. Walsh waved him back.

Fairchild resumed his seat reluctantly. "I was in my room. It's the last room down the North wing. Lieutenant, you've got to tell us what happened."

"Lucian is dead. He's been murdered!"

WILLIS GAVE a sharp cry, jumped to his feet and raced upstairs. Paul Drew stared, jowls trembling, eyes wide in horror. If this was an act, Paul was good. "I—don't know what to say. My father is dead? Murdered?"

Walsh said, "Paul, you act as if you were about eighteen years old. You're bordering fifty. You know what's been going on in this house. What is it?"

"Nothing," Paul exclaimed. "Only Jed's return. I don't see why he killed the old man. There's no reason, absolutely none. I get all the money except for a little that goes to Willis. Jed was cut off."

"That's news anyway," Walsh said. "I'm going upstairs. Coming along?"

Paul pushed himself deeper into the big chair. "I—couldn't do anything. I'm—not very good when—when something like this happens. I'll stay here."

Walsh shrugged and went back to the room. Willis stood before the corpse, dry-eyed and stern-faced. He whirled when Walsh entered the room.

"No matter what you thought of him—or us," he shouted, "you've got to find the man who did this. Do you understand?"

Walsh nodded. "That idea hit me awhile back, Willis. You'd better get

out. Messing up any clues won't help. I'll take charge until...."

Someone walked rapidly down the hall. Whoever it was hadn't come up the stairway, but Walsh knew there were outside stairs from one second floor wing. They led to the rear of the estate.

The man who literally burst into the room was tall, lean and ugly of face and mood. His fists were clenched, his teeth bared in a snarl. This was Jed Gardner, out of prison only a matter of hours.

Jed shouted. "I thought I heard your voice, Walsh. Get out of here before I kill you. Get out...." His voice tapered off. He stared at the dead man and slowly turned paler and paler. Then he suddenly rounded the end of the desk and bent over the corpse. One hand reached for a pulse. He moved the hand which held that gun.

There was an explosion loud enough to rend the eardrums. Jed let go of the wrist. Willis cried out in alarm. Lieutenant Walsh clapped a hand to his throat and the fingers came away marked with crimson. There was a nasty furrow on the left side of his neck.

Jed backed away a little. "I didn't mean to do that. I forgot that this gun has a hair-trigger. The old man used it when he was winning the west years ago; I didn't mean to do that."

"Come over here," Walsh snapped. "It could have been an accident, but with a man who hates me as much as you do, the chances are it was no accident. Reach, Jed. High and keep your hands way up."

Walsh searched him deftly and found nothing except a gigantic roll of bills. All of large denomiation and held tight with a strong elastic. He put the money into his own pocket.

"He-he gave me that to go away," Jed explained lamely.

"And I'll keep it just in case you decide to follow his advice," Walsh grunted. "Now both of you come downstairs with me. Jed, if you make an attempt to leave my sight, I'll put a bullet through you. That's a promise."

* * *

IN THE living room, Paul had somehow gathered the ambition to mix himself another drink which he was polishing off at a great rate. Walsh faced all three of them. "He knew he was in danger; that's why he called me. Only he didn't shoot when the killer walked in on him. I don't know why. If I did, I'd have the answer. Not one of you men has an alibi, not even a weak one. One of you was released from prison yesterday...."

"Don't say I killed him," Jed howled. "I'm on parole. They'll take me back...."

"Keep quiet," Walsh snapped. "Three years ago I was a sergeant. There was a hit-and-run accident. I tracked down the driver. You, Jed. I got the necessary evidence. You knew it and tried to bribe me so I charged you with that too. All of you got sore at me then, except possibly Willis who has more sense than all you others. Jed got a double rap because he tried to bribe me. Now there's been murder; I intend to find out who did it and the man responsible is going to pay."

"Stewart!" Paul Drew shouted. The most he'd exerted himself in years. It left him red-faced and panting.

"Stewart!" Willis repeated and a wondering look came into his eyes. "Lieutenant, Paul may be right. Mr. Drew heard he was in town. All we know about him is that name—Stewart. But it had a terrible effect on Mr. Drew. He—acted as if someone dead had come back to life."

"And Mr. Drew never offered a further word of explanation?" Walsh demanded.

Jed broke in. His voice was sour. "I know who Stewart is, but I'm not telling you, Walsh. I wouldn't tell you if the house was on fire. I wouldn't..."

Walsh seized him by the throat. "You'll talk here or behind bars. I don't care which, but you'll talk and if I take you downtown, you won't come back in a hurry. Talk!"

Willis said, "Jed, if you know anything speak up."

Jed shook himself free and straightened the cheap prison suit he still wore. "Stewart was an old crony of his. The old man's, I mean. Years ago, when he was making his first million,

he did Stewart out of something or other. Property that became valuable later. Before I—went away, the old man got a letter from Stewart and I saw it; Stewart said he'd kill him some day."

Walsh went to the telephone and made a report. While he waited for the Headquarters specialists to arrive, he stared at the wall in deep thought. The more he pondered the murder, the more confusing it became. Lucian Drew knew he was in danger and was prepared for it, even to holding a hair-trigger special in his hand; but why hadn't he shot his assailant? Whoever killed him must have come through the hall door; there was no other entrance to that room. Drew must have seen the killer then. Why hadn't he become alarmed?

Slitting a man's throat isn't a form of murder that is favored by the element of surprise. The murderer must first draw the blade, step close and get into position for the slash. Even then, the victim doesn't die instantly. Drew would have had time to shoot.

* * *

WILLIS TALKED to him later. Walsh liked him. He was about thirty years old. Drew had taken him in as a child, brought him up, educated him and accepted him as a son—to take the place of that mound of blubber whom Drew had never been able to stand.

Walsh said, "You're still on that government job, Willis?"

"Oh, yes; I've worked on it more than four years now. Some people claim a bank examiner has a dull existence, but I don't agree. I'm hoping to be promoted to regional supervisor soon. I've worked hard for it. Mr. Drew was very happy about the whole thing....Lieutenant—have you any ideas at all?"

"None worth stating. You have no motive. Jed is an ex-con, but that doesn't make him a killer. He inherits nothing so why should he murder the man upon whom he is dependent? Paul gets everything; being the only son, that's quite natural. But can you imagine Paul killing his own father—or anyone else for that matter? He was content, had everything he wanted. The old man was bound to die in the next few years. Paul had no motive for hurrying the death along."

"Then you think this mysterious Mr. Stewart is the best bet?"

"Yes—and I intend to try and find him at once. Willis, I want you to take over here. See that Jed doesn't stray. Paul won't give you any trouble."

"I'm not so certain," Willis said. "Every time Paul becomes morose he drinks himself into a wild state. Breaks things and carries on like a madman. But I can handle him. Thanks for trusting me, Lieutenant."

* * *

Walsh made a formal report of the whole thing, consulted with the medical examiner and fingerprint experts, then he drove back to town and started the ball rolling. Within twenty minutes he located a man from the West named Stewart. He'd checked into a cheap hotel a week ago. Walsh went there as fast as he could travel.

He got a key, entered the room and searched it. He found very little with the exception of some old papers indicating that Lucian Drew and Arthur Stewart had been partners at one time. Nobody had seen Stewart at the hotel since the night before.

Walsh phoned Attorney Collins, who had been the old man's lawyer. He wanted to check on Paul's claims about the estate. Collins told him to come right over.

The lawyer lived in an apartment house suite in midtown. He let Walsh in and he seemed to be much more excited than he'd sounded over the phone. "I'm glad you made it so fast. I know about the murder of Lucian Drew, naturally. But right after you phoned, I had another call. From a man who says his name is Stewart..."

"Where did he call from? Are you going to see him?" Walsh demanded.

Collins said, "I hope to see him some day. He told me a strange story. Said Lucian had cheated him and he'd just had his vengeance. Told me he knew I was honest and asked me to represent him. He will surrender, Lieutenant, provided you give me

concrete assurance that Stewart will not face the chair."

"You know better than that," Walsh snapped. "Nothing doing; I won't permit it. If the D.A. makes such a deal, I'll protest to the skies. This was cold-blooded, premeditated murder. Stewart will have to take his chances with a jury. A deal is out."

Collins nodded. "I thought you'd say that. Stewart will call me again. When, I don't know. He's hiding somewhere. You'll have a hard time getting him. Why not listen to the man? Perhaps he had a mighty good reason for killing Lucian."

"I know his reason," Walsh said. "It wasn't important enough to condone the taking of a man's life; nothing is. Stewart has admitted the crime. If you hide him, you're letting yourself in for a lot of trouble."

"But I'm not hiding him," Collins insisted. "I advised him to give himself up. He laughed at me. You want him. Very well, but how will you catch the man? Anyone clever enough can hide out indefinitely. There are times when a deal is necessary. This is one of the times."

"Not in my opinion," Walsh argued. "If he calls again, stall him and get in touch with Headquarters. Or lure the man into a trap. Now about the Drew estate. Just for the records, who gets it?"

Collins said, "Paul, mostly. Willis gets ten thousand dollars. Jed—nothing."

"Thanks." Walsh walked toward the door. "Remember about Stewart. We want that man."

WALSH WENT back to Stewart's hotel, talked to the manager and examined the missing man's entry on the register. Stewart had stated his home was in West Fork, a small town in the cowboy country. Walsh got a good description of him: he dressed as if he expected to buckle on a pair of chaps and ride the range in the hotel lobby.

"A strong-looking man too," the manager said. "You know—tough. But the day he arrived, he called the desk and asked for a doctor. I sent him the house physician."

Walsh accepted that as a lead and went to see the house doctor. He was co-operative. "Frankly, I know nothing about him except that he had a nice case of endocarditis. Heart condition. Seems he'd treated for it out West and had been taking medicine. But he forgot to bring the pills with him. So I prescribed the same medication. That's all there was to it."

"Did he," Walsh asked, "pack a knife? He must have stripped down a bit for your examination. If he had one, you'd know it."

"Yes, he carried a bowie knife in a leather scabbard—much as you policemen carry a gun in a shoulder holster. It was under his left armpit and looked ready for action."

Walsh got up. "You've been very helpful, doctor." Walsh went back to Stewart's room then. This time he searched it very carefully and in a bureau drawer he found a box of pills. They'd been dispensed by the drug store in the hotel building and the date on th prescription was the same as that on which Stewart had been examined by the hotel physician.

Walsh lounged against the arm of an overstuffed chair. "Funny," he mused. "Stewart was worried enough about his heart to provide himself with more pills and then he goes off without them."

He looked around further and discovered a heavy pistol in one suitcase. A man who was murder-bound would hardly be apt to leave a weapon like this behind Walsh phoned for fingerprint men again and when they arrived, he went down to the desk while the experts proceeded to dust everything in the room.

Walsh approached the clerk. "Did Stewart have any visitors at all? Any phone calls? Or did he make any?"

The clerk said, "Nobody came here to see him, Lieutenant. I can check on the phone calls. Just a moment." He returned with a single charge slip in his hand. "Stewart called this number half an hour after he checked in. There are no records of his having received a call or made any others."

Walsh only glanced at the number. He didn't have to check it. Stewart had phoned Lucian Drew's residence. Back in Stewart's room, the fingerprint men were packing up. The one

in charge made a report.

"No prints of any kind, Lieutenant. We found a couple on a comb inside a drawer. A metal surface that took a fair impression. I'd say they be-belonged to the man who hired this room, but somebody else wiped all flat surfaces to remove any other prints."

"Thanks," Walsh said. "I expected that and it proves something."

IT WAS after midnight when he pulled up half a mile from the Drew home again. Everyone was up. Walsh entered the estate well to the north and kept away from the house proper. He veered to the rear of the place and inspected the garage first. Using his flash and allowing only a slim ray to escape between fingers pressed against the lens, he examined the two cars in the garage and checked around the tool bench, the dark corners of the large place. He found nothing.

There was a tool house a hundred yards further behind the house and he went there., Again his search was in vain. He shut off the flash and walked slowly out of the little brick building. He heard a single footstep and began to spin around, but he was much too late. Whatever hit him was hard and backed up with considerable human muscle.

Walsh slid to his knees, fighting against the plunge into the black pit of unconsciousness. He fought hard, bending his head to avoid dizziness, placing both palms against the ground and trying to secure his balance enough to get up in a hurry.

He was struck again. This time at the base of the neck. There was no more fighting it. He felt cool grass against his cheek and that became his last sensation.

The grass wasn't there when he awoke. Instead his face caressed cement and his nostrils were twitching slightly at an acrid odor. He tried to raise his head and couldn't. He uttered a weak moan and succeeded in rolling over on his back.

He was inside the garage. There was only one car there now and its motor was purring smoothly. The exhaust was no more than a dozen feet from Walsh's head. He was breathing in the fumes. Had been for some minutes he reasoned dully.

He coughed, lifted his head this time and discovered his every muscle was limp his body listless. He felt like lying back and going off into a peaceful dream where there was no murder or violence. The idea was so strong that he succumbed to it.

Then he coughed again. His brain cleared. He was dying; this was the narcosis preceding death. He struggled into a sitting position. He knew then, that he had been carried or dragged here and placed close by the car. A would-be murderer had started the motor, closed the garage doors and gone off to let Walsh die.

Walsh crawled on hands and knees to the doors. He grasped the big door pull and supporting himself by it, managed to reach an upright position. He flung the door wide, staggered out and fell flat on the lawn. He sucked in huge gulps of fresh, cool air.

His head ached with a throb he thought would split it asunder, but gradually strength flowed back into those numbed muscles. He got to his feet, reeled a bit, but his sense of balance returned swiftly. He went back to the tool house and found his flashlight on the ground. He also discovered a grey, ten-gallon hat initialed on the band, A.S.

"Stewart," he grunted and managed to smile wryly. He carried the hat to the house. Jed let him in and Jed seemed highly unstrung. He greeted Walsh with a scowl. "What are you doing around here? I didn't hear you drive up?"

Walsh brushed past him. Paul, looking more gross than ever, was sprawled out on a divan, an inevitable drink in his fist and he was bordering on the stage of lush intoxication.

Walsh said, "Where is Willis?"

Paul waved his glass vaguely. "He went into town. To see Attorney Collins."

"So! Just when did he leave?"

Paul aroused himself into a semi-sitting position. "It was one o'clock, on the dot. I know that, because Willis shut off the five-of-one news flash-

es and said he was leaving at once."

Walsh pondered that one. He'd been struck at about five after one and then dragged to the the garage some distance away. A man working at top speed couldn't have completed the job by one fifteen at the least.

"Did Willis drive right out after he left?" Walsh asked. "How much time elapsed between the moment he left the house and drove from the garage? You could hear the car passing the windows of this room."

Paul said, "Off hand, not more than two minutes. Or three. Just long enough for him to reach the garage, start the car and drive out. But you might ask Jed; he was on the estate somewhere."

Walsh eyed the ex-convict coldly. "You'd say you were far to the rear at the time. You'd know nothing, would you, Jed?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jed growled. "I heard Willis drive away, but I don't know how much time he spent in the garage."

Walsh sighed. "All right, Jed; I can wait. Paul, I was attacked out there, dragged to the garage and left to die beside a car with its motor running. I don't know who did it. Willis hardly had time if you are telling the truth. He'd had a splendid opportunity. Maybe even you did it. Anyway, I don't feel too hot, so I'm calling off the hunt for tonight. I'll want all of you on deck tomorrow."

He thought he heard a derisive chuckle from Jed, but he couldn't be sure of it. Paul merely raised his glass and poured the highball down his fat throat. Walsh walked to where he'd left his car and drove back to town.

He made one visit before going to Headquarters. He entered a large building and knew he'd find the office to which he was going, illuminated and busy. He closed the door behind him.

On the door was a seal and the words DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE.

* * *

LIEUTENANT Walsh reported for work shortly after noon. He made several long distance calls to the West and established several facts in his mind. That Stewart possesed an excellent reason for killing Lucian Drew, that he was a sick man with a bad heart condition, that he'd been sold the ten-gallon hat which Walsh had found on the estate the night before. Walsh discovered a few additional things too, mostly about Lucian's wild and woolly youth in the old West.

At three in the afternoon he went to Drew's home and found Jed sulking around the place and taking care to keep out of Walsh's way. Paul was in the living room, looking as if he hadn't moved from there since Walsh saw him last. He was a trifle more sober however.

Paul said, "Willis is upstairs in his room. He wants to see you. I can't tell you why; it's a surprise."

Paul made a wry face and turned back to his book and glass. Walsh discovered Willis busy packing. There were three suitcases and a wardrobe trunk partially filled. Willis grinned at him.

"Well, everything can't go wrong at the same time. I got word this morning that I've been promoted. To head the field office in New Orleans. I've got to be there in forty-eight hours, which means I leave on an early morning train."

"Well, congratulations." Walsh offered his hand. "Lucian would have been glad to know about your new job. He always talked about how ambitious you were."

Willis hesitated. "Of course, Lieutenant, if you need me here for anything, I'll try to postpone the date a little. My office is bound to listen to reason."

"Certainly not, Willis. This is your big chance. Don't muff it. Anyway I can always get you if you are needed. And, there is no reason to think you haven't told all you know about the murder."

"I have," Willis said seriously. "I wish I knew more. Collins said Stewart openly confessed to the crime."

Someone called Walsh's name from downstairs. It was Jed and when Walsh appeared at the head of the stairs, the ex-convict merely jerked a

thumb in the direction of the telephone. Walsh hurried to the instrument. Attorney Collins was on the wire.

"They told me at Headquarters I might reach you here," Collins said. "I just had another call from Stewart—about half an hour ago. I deliberated whether or not to notify you and decided it might be best. Stewart wants to meet me tonight at eleven. He named the spot. It isn't customary for an attorney to divulge confidential information from a client but—Stewart is a self-confessed murderer and anyway, I didn't agree to take his case. What are you going to do about this, Lieutenant?"

"See you as fast as I can get to your office. Learn where the rendezvous is and keep that date. You did the right thing, Collins, and I appreciate it."

Paul Drew had become interested enough in the call to waddle from the living room and plop himself in one of the hallway chairs. Walsh told him about the call.

"Good," Paul said, "then it's just about over. Put a bullet through him for me, will you, Lieutenant?"

* * *

LATER, COLLINS talked willingly. The meeting place was a dozen miles out of town, along a deserted road. At nine-thirty Walsh took out a police car and drove rapidly to the outskirts. He watched the rear view mirror constantly, but saw no signs of a tail. At ten he made a U-turn, went back and took another road which brought him to town by a different route. At eleven, he had parked the police car and was crossing the rear of the Drew estate. There was a gun in his fist.

He selected a dark, secluded spot and lay flat, never taking his eyes off the house itself. Half an hour went by and he started worrying. He could be wrong, though he thought enough of his clues and ideas to gamble on them.

Then he saw a man emerge from the back door. He moved rapidly past the garage, stopped at the tool house and took out a shovel. He continued on with Walsh well behind but never letting the man out of his sight.

The man suddenly came to a halt and peered around. Finally he snapped on a flash and sent the beam into a very thick and high tree. He propped the shovel against the tree trunk, gave a running jump and grasped a low limb of the tree. He hoisted himself up and vanished amidst the foliage. Then Walsh realized why his search of the estate hadn't produced any results.

Something came out of the tree and dropped with a flat thumping sound. It lay there, perfectly still, but someone was coming down from the tree, limb by limb.

Willis jumped, hit the ground in an upright position and reached for the shovel. His hand froze and then continued on to grasp the shovel handle. "So it didn't work," he said. "You didn't fall for it, Lieutenant?"

"Did you think I would?" Walsh kept his gun level. "That's the body of Stewart, isn't it? You killed him, planned things so he'd take the blame for the murder and once the body was securely hidden, Stewart would have disappeared, a wanted and self-confessed murderer. Only it was you who phoned Attorney Collins."

Willis said, "He did kill Mr. Drew; and I killed Stewart in turn. I was afraid of the consequences...."

"It won't work," Walsh snapped. "You killed Drew, too. I even know why. Because long ago, Drew shot and killed your father. You were a baby then. Drew felt bad about it and practically adopted you. I wondered why a man like him would take in an infant. His wife was dead and he had a son of his own. Stewart hated Drew. He meant to get him somehow. Drew knew it, knew Stewart was in town. That's why he called on me for help. Only by that time Stewart was dead."

WILLIS SAID, "Lieutenant, I don't believe you can prove anything...."

"Oh, stop it," Walsh said wearily. "I know the story from start to finish. After Drew phoned me, you had to work fast. You went into his room. He saw you, but you were the one person in the world he trusted. The murderer had to be such a person because otherwise Drew would have fired that hair-trigger gun. You slit

his throat and even then, as he was dying, he didn't shoot—maybe because he recognized the fact you were merely administering justice. You attacked me when I was hunting the corpse of Stewart and you left that big hat to throw suspicion on him. I woke up in the garage, slowly dying of monoxide poisoning. But you didn't put me there; Jed did. You'd hardly want me dead when I was convinced Stewart was the killer."

Willis let his shoulders sag and he seemed utterly beaten and dejected. Then, without warning, he swept the shovel into the air and began spinning around intent on slashing the detective with the sharp edge. Walsh fired one shot. It hit Willis squarely through the right elbow. He screamed, the shovel fell out of his hand and Walsh stepped in with handcuffs ready.

"Let's go," he told Willis. "And don't worry about that promotion you were notified of."

Willis had all the fight out of him. "Lieutenant, I had reason to kill Drew. Look, I'm young; I'm going places. Give me a break."

"You're going places all right," Walsh grunted, "and there's no return road. About the promotion. I got the F.B.I. to help me there. The whole thing was a fake to force your hand, to make you permanently hide Stewart's body in a hurry because I doubted you had time to really hide it before. You wanted that promotion. You'd let nothing stand in your way and, naturally, you couldn't go off and leave Stewart's body hanging in the tree. In a few weeks the leaves would fall, and someone would spot it. Stewart was a wanted murderer, not a dead man."

Willis didn't answer. Near the house, Walsh propelled him toward the porch. "We'll make a brief stop to pick up Jed. Then Paul will be alone. I think he'll like that. There'll be no one he has to share his food and drink with."

SEARCH AND SEIZURE

(From the notebook of our criminologist, HAROLD GLUCK

AT ABOUT 7:30 P.M. Detective Lieutenant Belland, an officer of the Seattle police force narcotic detail, received information from a confidential informer, who was also a known narcotic user, that unknown persons were smoking opium in the Europe Hotel. The informer was taken back to the hotel to interview the manager, but he returned at once, saying he could smell burning opium in the hallway. Belland communicated with federal narcotic agents and between 8:30 and 9 o'clock went back to the hotel with four such agents. All were experienced in narcotic work and recognized at once a strong odor of burning opium which, to them, was distinctive and unmistakable.

The odor led to Room 1. The officers did not know who was occupying that room. They knocked and a voice inside asked who was there. "Lieutenant Belland," was the reply. there was a slight delay, some "shuffling or noise" in the room and then the defendant opened the door. The officer said, "I want to talk to you a little bit." The defendant, a woman, as he describes it, "stepped back acquiescently and admitted us." He said, "I want to talk to you about the opium smell in the room here." She denied that there was such a smell. Then he said, "I want you to consider yourself under arrest because we are going to search the room."

The search turned up incriminating opium and smoking apparatus, the latter being warm, apparently from recent use. The defendant went to trial

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GRAVEYARD PASSAGE



By Cliff Campbell

(Author of "Pre-View of The Victim")

Sometimes it pays to be dumb, but the payment can be in cash — or maybe, bullets!

"THERE'S nothing to this deal," the tall dark guy said. He said it too smoothly. That should have warned me—but no, I'm dumb. I've been in the racket long enough to know that when things are too easy, that's the time to start looking around for the

gimmick. But I'm dumb; and the five hundred dollar bills he placed on the desk made me dumber than ever.

I'd just been figuring if the Greek in the hamburger joint around the corner would stand for another small tab when these five C's stroll into the office. It's wonderful and more than amazing what dough can do. It makes smart guys dumb and dumb guys dumber. It all depends how hungry a guy has to be to be rated in the upper brackets of A-No. One suckers.

"It's just collecting a race horse bet," the guy said. "It's all perfectly legit, nothing to it. Little Nick gets scared when shamuses come around. He'll give you five grand faster than I could get it personally from him. Your end's ten per cent. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, my eyes riveted on the five C's. It looked like money from home.

He threw a small box on the table. It couldn't have weighed more than a couple of pounds at most and was about three by four inches and about an inch thick. Nicest and most innocent little white parcel a man ever saw.

"Little Nick will want some identification. This will prove that you're representing me; it will make things easier for you."

Like an umpchay I nod. That seemed reasonable. I kept staring at the five C's and was impatiently waiting for the guy to scrambo so I could get out and get myself wrapped around a porterhouse. My stomach was rumbling feeble protests over the delay. When a guy's hungry it's hard to think. Looking back at it now. I must have been practically starving to death, because I didn't—and couldn't—think.

Well, the tall guy says for me to contact him at the Braxton Hotel soon as I finish putting the bite on Little Nick. He said his name was Meershaw and that he owned a couple of bookie rooms in Philly.

That meant nothing to me. I didn't care who he was outside ot the fact he had the five C's to spend for a dinky routine call. I like guys with coarse C notes, especially as I seem never to have any of the same myself.

I wait for him to just barely get out of the building and I grab my battered fedora and start for the Elite, where steaks are something out the this world.

Only I didn't make the Elite and I didn't make the steak. All I did make was a gun jabbed just above the right kidney soon as I came out into the street.

The guy in back of the rod was big and his heavy face looked solemn, like maybe he was disappointed in the world and all the viciousness it represented.

Crowds pushing around us didn't seemed to bother him in the slightest. He was one calm guy when he said: "Just get in the car, buddy, and you won't get hurt." He inclined his chin at a tan sedan double-parked. A guy small enough to be a jockey but getting too heavy sat in back of the wheel.

I'm a reasonable guy and also I like to go on living, especially when I got five hundred bucks to live on and cut a few capers with. I got in the sedan. The big guy got in the back seat with me.

The sedan made a turn at the corner and was heading northward when the big guy started to pat my pockets with his left hand. His right hand kept the gun pushed insistently against my side.

FIRST THING he found was the box. He grunted approval and flipped it into the front seat. The little driver grinned. Second thing he found was my gun. He pocketed that almost regretfully. Third thing he found were the five C's. He frowned at me and said: "Tish—tut. These sorta change matters. We just thought you were Meershaw's contact guy, a guy who didn't know what he was doing. Tush," he muttered again. "Now it looks like you got part of

this deal, that ain't nice, buddy."

He looked at the serial numbers on the bills and shook his head regretfully again. Then he stuffed them carelessly in his topcoat pocket.

That did it. My stomach growled a louder protest. Losing the package didn't mean anything; losing my gun wasn't nice; losing the dough was everything.

I lashed out and backward with my right hand, catching him flush in the kisser and he slammed back in the seat. I got my hand on his gun and twisted it free. I brought it down across the bridge of his nose, then reversed it and tapped the startled driver on his pimple.

The sedan swerved across the street, climbed the curb and smashed into a telephone pole.

That jar helped, for the sad big guy was coming out with my own gun. His chance of copping the shooting duke in close had been good until we cracked up. He was thrown hard against the front seat.

This time I cracked him on the back of the head, draping him over the seat. A siren was screaming in the distance and gaping bystanders were surrounding us.

Only a dumb guy would have done what I had done—taking a potshot with my fist. But it had worked; nobody could be expected to be that dumb, and that's probably why the deal had worked out. But the next thing I did really was dumb. In fact I hit a new high.

I got hold of the five C's, my package and both guns and lammed away from there. That was stupid, for the gawkers around the wrecked sedan saw me get my dough out of the big guy's pocket—and they saw the guns—and, most important, they saw me take it on the dodge away from there.

I could have explained the deal okay. I guess. My rep in town as a private op was fair. I had never pulled anything too raw. It was because I didn't know *why* this had happened that I scrammed. I wanted to figure it out, and also I didn't like being pushed around. My name's not Michael Terance Flynn for nothing. I don't push easy, outside of when I push myself into a tough spot for being dumb. I don't get mad about that, because I'm doing it to myself; but when punks take it on themselves to push me, it sorta irks a man somewhat.

I knew better than to return to the office. That would be the first place cops would show up, and I certainly wasn't ready to talk to them yet.

The best place seemed to be a bar. I got a drink lined up in front of me. Then after the waiter had ankled away I got the little package open.

One glance was enough. I whistled soundlessly. It was loaded with bills packed in a neat, compact pile. Most of them seemed to be of ten grand denomination, but a forlorn one grander had staggered into this big time cache. The one granders looked puny and apologetic in comparision.

I made a quick guess at maybe two hundred grand, and got the package back in my inside pocket in a hurry without giving it an exact count. A barroom's no place to be thumbing carelessly through dough of this size. In fact I knew it for what it was—sudden death.

I thought of Meershaw, and silently cussed him. He simply had hired me as an errand boy to deliver this to Little Nick. Maybe he thought it would be safe with me—but not on him.

And that guess seemed a good one, for these two guys hadn't found me by accident. It seemed obvious that Meershaw had been tailed to my office, which would indicate that they hadn't wanted to take the dough off him personally. I could think of lots of reasons why that may have been.

But the fact remained—I was stuck with it—and it was hot. This certainly was no spot for any guy to be in—even a smart one.

I GOT up suddenly and went to the cashier. My instructions had been to deliver it to Little Nick. That I would do—and fast—before trouble caught up with me.

It didn't have to catch up. It was waiting at the cashier's cage. I'd forgotten I was broke; I had to spring one of the hundreds. The cashier

looked suspiciously at it, and at me with even more suspicion in her eyes. She called the manager and he said, "Okay," but it wasn't okay, I knew. The cashier started to piddle around, and I knew she was stalling until the manager made a telephone call.

That telephone call would sink me if cops showed up. There was too much unexplained trouble in the package I was carrying, and I recalled how the sad-faced hood had studied the serial numbers on the bills and then mournfully told me that it looked like I had had part of some deal. Those hundreds were hot, too.

It was then that I out-thought myself again. There was a yell from the cashier, then a series of shouts.

I made the corner in a sprint, then walked into a drugstore. I went into the phone booth and sat down. Pretty soon, when matters seemed reasonably quiet, I got up. I was lucky. I caught a cab quick, and got away from there.

It was a little early in the day for Little Nick to be in his joint on Broad Street. So I headed for the Braxton to see Meershaw. I needed some nice cool dough for all the trouble I found myself in.

I told the cabby to wait (because I couldn't do anything else) and got out fast before he could say what his eyes already were saying.

The clerk told me Meershaw was in 306.

I'd just raised the knuckles to rap on the door when I heard a gun go off inside.

I just stood there with the hand upraised, looking foolish, when the door popped open in my face. And there was the big sad-faced guy again, only now he was looking mad.

He took a hasty step back into the room and reached for his shoulder holster. My right hand still was upraised, but the left was in the topcoat pocket wrapped around the butt of the gun I'd taken from him a short time before. I turned it loose, letting go twice at the floor, and one slug hit him in the foot.

He howled and tried to swing his gun around. For the second time that day I busted him, this time down low. This time when he bent over I conked him almost gently on the pimple with my roscoe.

He just folded up, looking tired and went to sleep on the floor.

When I looked down at him, I gaped. There was another guy asleep on the floor, only he was sleeping with his eyes open. He had a little hole in his cheek going upward and a bigger hole in the back of his head.

Meershaw was on the bed. His face looked like somebody had used it in a meat grinder. He, too, was asleep, but breathing.

I heeled the door shut quick. Just my luck to step right into a bumpoff —and Lord only knows what else.

The phone rang and the telephone operator in the lobby said: "Anything wrong up there, Mr. Meershaw? A guest said she heard something like shots."

I tried my best to chuckle nonchalantly.

"A gingerale bottle got too hot by the radiator and went off. It started another one popping. Nothing serious."

"I'm so glad to hear that," she said politely. "Just ring if you need anything." She rang off.

I put the receiver down slowly. Did I need anything? Boy, did I! My stomach growled suggestively. I disregarded that; what I needed right now was some brains.

I FRISKED all three of them, seeking an answer. None had a thing worthwhile outside of money. That I took. It didn't even amount to one hundred, but I gave them the four one hundred hot bills I had, ramming one in each pocket and two in Meershaw's. Also I gave Meershaw back his package after carefully rubbing my prints off it. He didn't know he was getting it back, and that probably was all for the good.

The sad-faced guy groaned a little and moved his head like he was coming to. So, in deep contemplation, I kicked him in the chin: he stopped groaning.

I don't know why, but it just seemed to be a good idea to take off

Meershaw's belt, pull his legs up behind him and tie them to his arms. He was a bother. So was the sad-faced guy, so I tied him up, too. The third guy wouldn't ever bother anyone again until the Devil permits his inmates to throw a tantrum occasionally.

He looked familiar, and every time I looked at him I almost automatically thought of Little Nick. The two thoughts were associated without a doubt. I'd undoubtedly seen him with the squat Little Nick.

They just went together like ham and rye. My stomach growled again at the thought. I made it keep quiet. This was no time to sit down to a porterhouse and take it easy.

It was a cinch the cops wanted me for a hoist job. The questioning would be long and rough. And pretty soon someone would have to stand a murder rap. I had a hunch I could be framed like a portrait for that. These monkeys already had proved too clever for me.

The hundred I'd had to leave at the bar would be hooked up with this dough. Only a dummy didn't know that. So that would put me right back in the middle again.

And I still didn't know the why of all this; that's why I didn't reach for a phone and call the cops right on the spot.

But I did reach for the phone and—on a hunch—call Little Nick.

He was a hard guy to contact, but I finally got through to him at his bookie joint. I told him I was Meershaw and that I was coming right over.

I could hear his quickly indrawn breath and then his sarcastic, "Yes. Do come right over. I've been expecting you."

That was corn and I knew it, but you can't stop a guy from doing something he's hell-bent on doing. That goes especially for dumb clucks like me on spots that are too hot for reasons unknown.

I went through the lobby and the clerk and telephone operator gave me toothy smiles. That wasn't good either. When the stiff upstairs was found they'd remember my mug.

The cab was waiting. The cabby seemed to have a great load lifted from his shoulders when I showed up. He even smiled a little. I didn't.

I'm a cluck, but sometimes I just follow hunches. So I got out a block away from Little Nick's and went into the alley in back of his joint. A fire escape took me to the second floor, and steps inside down to Little Nick's on the rear of the first floor.

The door of Little Nick's office opened, and I flattened myself against the wall of the dark stairway.

"Remember," I heard Little Nick's bull voice say, "when that Irish dummy shows up—I don't want to see him. In fact I don't want to see him ever. Let him get found someplace with that dough. Any side road will do. And don't touch that dough—understand? Let him be found with it."

A loose-jawed mug muttered, "Sure," closed the door and went up front to join the rest of Little Nick's hoods. I could see them scattered loosely outside and inside the building at the entrance—a reception committee in force waiting for a dumb Irisher to show up.

MEERSHAW wasn't Irish. In fact I was the only Irisher who was in on this play as far as I knew, and I'd just heard the order to be taken for a one-way ride.

Now I'm not in favor of rides for anyone, especially so when the guest is Michael Terance Flynn. Prickles along my spine were telling me to get the hell out of there and go to the cops and blat around like everything about something that I knew nothing about. But being a sucker was getting to be damned tiresome.

There was a racing form on the landing and I rolled it into a neat square like newsboys do when they heave the papers on porches. It made a nice looking package.

I put it in my inside pocket and went down the steps.

Little Nick was pretty sure of himself. There was nobody in the office with him, but he couldn't hide the look of surprise in seeing me pop up in such a manner.

He came cautiously around the huge flat desk. He was broad as a three foot beam, but in height just peanuts, maybe five feet even. Still he definitely wasn't anyone to get tangled up with, looking like he'd be too hard to untangle.

The heater already was in my right hand. With the left I got out the package.

"My job," says I like crazy, "was to deliver this to you. Now you've got it."

"What's the beef?" he asked politely. But there was murder in his eyes.

"The beef," says I, "is five hundred bucks of clean money and some explaining."

His eyebrows skated upward. "That all—just five hundred?"

"That's all; that's what Meershaw promised. For the trouble I been through it's worth a helluva lot more."

"So you're the dumb Irisher he hired to play delivery boy?" he said wonderingly. "Meershaw used to be a smart guy before he became a double-crosser. I guess he's still a little smart."

"Or was," I said suggestively.

"Was?" Little Nick muttered. "He's dead?"

"Might be."

Little Nick almost smiled.

"I'll pay you," he said almost happily. He turned nonchalantly to his desk. Before he pulled open the door he looked at the muzzle of my gun again and smiled. I felt very sure of myself. The man with the drop always does.

I'm dumb. He pulled the desk drawer open and the room seemed to explode in smoke and bells all over the joint sounded like a fire department on a spree.

There was no use shooting at where I thought Little Nick might be; that just would have brought a kill rap down on me. And being blind as a bat right then I never could have escaped his hoods. By doing nothing I had a minor chance to stay alive.

Feet pounded in the corridor and seemed to drift into the room on all sides. My gun was knocked from my

hand just as I was knocked up against the wall. On the rebound the next punch knocked me out into the hallway on the floor. The air felt clean and cool and nice down there. No smoke. I decided to stay there. I did. Something banged against the back of my head and a black ocean seemed to wash over me.

A MONOTONOUS stream of curses brought me groggily around, and I became aware of a great coolness at the back of my aching head.

"Snap him out of it," Nick raged. "Damn it snap him out of it. It's a wonder you didn't bust the dummy's skull. Damnit never hit a lug too hard unless it's for keeps."

"But, boss," a voice said petulantly. "You just told me to get rid of this guy before he showed up. Usually it don't matter when a guy's going for a ride whether he's tapped easy or hard. Sometime's to tap 'em hard makes the ride easier."

I knew then that it was the loose-jawed man I'd seen in the hallway, and that in his own cumbersome way he was fumbling around with a wet towel at the knot on the back of my head.

I kept the eyes closed and tried to think.

I realized that if I'd had that money on me I'd now be a corpse. That I didn't have it made all the difference in the world. Little Nick had to know where it was; that gave me an ace.

The answer seemed clear enough now. Meershaw and Little Nick had been in on a deal, but Meershaw didn't want to be seen anywhere with Little Nick. So somebody had elected me stooge. The way those two hoods had picked me up outside showed that I'd been fingered. And Nick had said: "Meershaw used to be a smart guy before he became a double-crosser." That was it. Little Nick had told Meershaw to contact me, then he probably had phoned Little Nick I was coming over. But in the meantime—to make it look good—he had had two of his own hoods—probably from Philly—rob me. That way he got it all. Little Nick got nothing, and Meershaw had an alibi if I simply disappeared. Just the old double-X. It'd been done plenty times before.

Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe the two hoods had been Little Nick's men. It didn't matter. But what did matter was I was getting a pushing around—and I don't like to be pushed.

A sure way to find out just who I wanted to push around for a change was to get the two guys together.

I had a hunch that since Meershaw had been beaten up, apparently by the stiff now in his room, that he was the one who had tried it. But his own hood—the sad-faced guy—had stopped him with a shot. Then I had stopped the sad-faced guy.

There was something lacking—something vital but missing—in that theory of mine, but I couldn't figure it out. I decided to play my ace to bring a payoff. Little Nick had to know where that dough was. So I left my eyes flutter open.

Little Nick grunted and brought his flat face close to mine. "Where's that dough, you cluck?"

I looked dazedly about. We were in some sort of a cellar room and a hand on my coat collar was holding me upright.

"Dunno," I hedged. Little Nick's big hand went back then down and I went sideways out of the chair, I hit the floor hard.

Hands picked me up. Little Nick kept repeating the question and I kept giving him the same answer and smashing against the same spot on the floor.

I lost all count of how many times it happened. All I realized clearly was a mounting rage against Little Nick. I knew, given the chance, he was one man I would kill.

When I thought I had him convinced that I couldn't tell him on the spot, I asked: "What time is it?"

Little Nick said: "Four o'clock."

"I was to meet Meershaw at four-thirty," I said groggily. "I think he'll know where the money is. He told me to do what I did with the newspaper package."

LITTLE NICK looked baffled for a moment. Then: "That Meer-

shaw always was a screwball. Maybe he would try some damn fool thing like this? Where were you to meet him?"

I managed a grin. "I'll take you there, but I won't tell you where. I think he was afraid you were going to put him on a spot, so he fixed one up for you. And damned if I'm not going to help him put you on it!"

Little Nick's hand went back and I hit the floor again. He got tired of that and the guy in back of me started to bang first one ear and then the other until I thought my eardrums would pop. The monotonous slapping kept my body swinging like a pendulum on the chair while Little Nick held me upright.

Finally it stopped, and I knew then that Little Nick had been fighting the clock and had lost. It was getting too near four-thirty. He did precisely what I knew he would do. He assembled three more hoods and they dragged me out to a car in the alley. If Meershaw had arranged a spot for Little Nick, then Little Nick planned to reverse that spot. Meershaw had the money on him and he had the answer to what I wanted to know. That was: Would he take it off Meershaw, or would he see that Meershaw kept it and his body was found on a roadside?

As the air hit my face and the sedan started moving, my head cleared. That was what I couldn't remember in my theory: Why didn't either man seem to want the dough? If it was as hot as that it seemed like a good idea to make them start shooting at each other, but shooting only would make the heat hotter. . .

I gave up trying to think and sagged wearily against the cushions where I was wedged between two hoods in the back seat. Little Nick and the slack-jawed guy were in the front seat with the driver.

Suddenly I sat upright. Looking past Little Nick's big shoulder I saw a car pass. Plenty were passing, but the driver of this was the jockey-sized hood of the morning. He had a bandage on his forehead.

He just gave us a cursory glance and kept right on going. My heart jumped. I gambled that he'd rush to

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Meershaw and when we got there we would walk into three guns. Meershaw and the sad-faced guy should be conscious by now, and he would untie them. That made me feel good. Little Nick, the so-and-so, was going to get it. . .

"Where to?" Little Nick said, looking at his wristwatch.

"He's coming to my room," I said keeping the face straight.

"Where?"

I took a deep breath and said: "Braxton Hotel; Room 306. Now can I scram?"

Little Nick chuckled. The slack-jawed guy guffawed. I knew it was a dumb crack to make, but sometimes dumbness pays off. . .

A few minutes later I knew that it hadn't paid off. In fact I was on more of a spot than ever. No matter how the shooting went I was certain to be Johnny-On-The-Spot. For Little Nick was making me lead the way to the room.

My stomach suddenly didn't feel hungry anymore. It seemed to have flattened against my spine and was trying to crawl away and hide.

When we got to 306, I stepped back and motioned.

"Open it," Little Nick said quietly. "It's your room."

Now I knew what kind of a meal I was going to get when I opened the door—a stomach full of lead.

Little Nick jabbed me in the back with his rod and hissed. "Open it!"

I put my hand on the nob, closed my eyes, and swung open the door.

There was a brief silence, then Little Nick said: "Jeest! Jeest!"

A hand on my back shoved me into the room. I stumbled right over the corpse and landed flat on my kisser, my body across its chest.

The sad-faced guy and Meershaw had their eyes opened and glaring at us. They were still nicely belted.

"Duck soup!" Little Nick said, grinning at Meershaw and bringing up his gun. "Duck soup!" he repeated. "Made to order."

A HOOD kicked the door closed. Guns in five hands seemed to make the small room more crowded.

"So you knocked off Freddie, eh?" Little Nick said flatly, motioning at the corpse. "Not that I didn't trust you, but he's been tailing you all the way from Philly. I just wanted to make sure you did what you were told to do."

Meershaw's battered face looked amazed even as his frantic eyes pleaded. "No," he croaked, "I didn't do it. He was working on me with a gun butt, wanting to know who my two pals were that stuck up the dick I'd given the dough to. I didn't know nothing about any stickup. I wasn't finagling."

"You ain't got the dough?" Little Nick said as though relieved.

"Hell no! You should have had it by now. I did what you said, to bring it to the dumb dick to deliver."

That was very uncomplimentary of them, but I didn't get up to protest. The corpse was too valuable and comfortable to climb off of yet.

"Then who in hell did this?" Little Nick jerked his chin at the corpse and at the bound bodies of the sad-faced guy and back at Meershaw himself.

Meershaw gritted: "Untie me. I'll find out." He was glaring down at me. "I got a good hunch," he said ominously.

Little Nick turned, looked down, and kicked me in the ribs. "Where's that dough?"

I nodded at the sad-faced guy, who looked surprised. "Why not try him. He took it off me. I came here to tell Meershaw that I'd been heisted. He was just leaving, and this Freddie punk was dead on the floor."

I knew he didn't have the dough, but I needed a little time; I had a play to make.

"Frisk him!" Little Nick ordered. One of the hoods came forward and did so. No soap.

Little Nick smiled. Meershaw scowled, and glared at me.

"He had a pal," I suggested, turning on the body. "A very little guy. He was driving the hack."

Meershaw cursed. "What a dumb dick you are!"

"It's all to the good," Little Nick said. "We just find this little guy and take his pal and Flynn—and the

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dough and dump them and it in a ditch. We'll be clear."

The sad-faced guy looked at me and an eyelid lowered. I didn't know what he meant but all of a sudden I felt somewhat sorry for tying him up.

"What!" Meershaw gasped. "Throw a quarter million away. You nuts, Little Nick?"

"Yeah, nuts," Little Nick said. "Nuts—like a fox."

"I don't get it."

"It's simple," Little Nick said smoothly. "George in New York owed us over a hundred grand on bets. We picked him up and took him out in the country to do a little persuading about him paying us. That persuading took three days. We figured it was worth another fifty a day for all the bother. So we took him for a quarter of a million."

"What's wrong with that," Meershaw said frowning.

"The dough he gave us was on fire. All marked bills. He beefed, called it kidnaping."

Meershaw's jaw flopped open. "The dirty louse....But why didn't you tell me?"

Little Nick shrugged. "I only found it out about an hour ago myself. I didn't know where to reach you. I was waiting for this dumb Flynn to show up to make him the fall guy. Now we got to find this little guy Flynn is talking about."

"Hell!" Meershaw grated. "Untie me."

"Search him first," I suggested. "He just gave me a newspaper folded in a package. I'll bet he's got the dough."

"Maybe Meershaw was trying a clip at that," he said. "Frisk him."

"You're nuts and he's a liar," Meershaw yelled.

Three hoods came over and started to go over Meershaw. One finally said; "Hah," and came up with a package.

Little Nick took one look at it and smashed his gun across Meershaw's face. The three hoods behind over Meershaw looked like they wanted to give him some of the same on Little Nick's say-so.

It was the hood in back of me that had me worried, but I took the chance. It was slack-jaw, the guy who had played patty-cake on my ears.

I turned over suddenly, stuck an arm out with a gun in it, and when the bang came there was a hole in his pimple and he fell backwards.

I leaped to my feet covering the three hoods and started to back to a wall.

It was then that the door popped open and the little jockey-sized guy with the bandage on his head came through, a gat in his right hand and in the opened palm of his left a glistening badge.

I almost gave him the business before I saw the badge. And right behind him came Detective Chief Ferguson and two dicks, police positives in their hands.

I looked at Little Nick and felt glad that I'd killed him, then almost keeled over.

LATER Chief Ferguson kept shaking his head in puzzlement. We were at headquarters. Three hoods were in the morgue, four in the can.

"Greatest piece of work I've ever come across," the sad-faced guy said sourly. "One man taking a whole kidnap mob.

That was high compliment, coming from an F.B.I. man. The little guy, also F.B.I., was watching the city surgeon bandage the sad-faced guy's foot.

I took a look at that foot and shuddered. I was in for it; you don't go around shooting Feds.

Neither do you go around busting them in the snoot. I'd done that twice. Maybe, if I was lucky he didn't know I'd drop-kicked off his chin. None of those things could be taken back.

But I did give him something back.

"Here's twenty-one bucks," I said hesitantly. "I took it off you and gave you a hot century. I'm sorry."

He looked startled and started searching. Finally he located it in his vest pocket. His sad face grinned.

"I just needed some clean money," I explained. "I just traded. I thought you were a hood."

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"You've got five thousand dollars in clean reward money coming to you."

I straightened abruptly, and my stomach rumbled remindingly.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"It was great work," he said. "Some of the most courageous I've—"

I abruptly turned and was leaving. All these compliments were making the chest swell, and when the chest swelled the stomach seemed to collapse like a hollow drum. I recalled I still had the dough I'd taken from Meershaw and the dead Freddie. I put that down to expenses.

"Where you going, Flynn?" Ferguson yelled.

I was almost running. "To get a porterhouse!" I yelled back over my shoulder.

And I did—a double portion.

MURDER FOR LAUGHS

A Fact Feature

by Glen Peggie

YOU'VE heard of murderers who wept, turned sheet-white, or fainted when arrested, but here's the story of a man who was just a little different. This killer, Ralph Jerome Selz of San Francisco, laughed until his sides ached.

But then, his sense of humor had always been just a little peculiar....

His first brush with the law, for example, came about when a gas station at which he was employed was held up and robbed of twenty-seven dollars. Selz was the only employee present at the time, and so, of course, the police were hopeful that he was the observant type and could give an accurate description of the thief.

"Accurate description?" Selz echoed. "Sure!" He told them, thinking hard, that the thief had been about six feet tall, weighed around two-thirty or so, had grey eyes, and brown hair.

It was a good description, and a policeman with a pad and pencil started to jot it down; then, suddenly, he stopped.

By what was too close to be a coincidence, the man giving the description bore a strange resemblance to the thief, and had grey eyes and brown hair.

Confronted by this fact, Selz roared with laughter, exploding all over the place.

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"Guess you're right," he said between gasps, "But I *was* describing the thief; I stole the twenty-seven bucks myself."

He got thirty days for that one, his first offense.

While he was in jail serving this sentence, he wrote to his insurance company and reported his car stolen. The insurance company promptly paid up, but the local police, who were beginning to look upon Selz as a bit of a queer duck, were dubious about the matter. They went to work on Selz, questioning him for over two hours—with no results whatever.

Then, when they were about to give up, and conclude that Selz's car really *had* been stolen, Selz suddenly began to roar with laughter.

"You fellows look so sad," he said, "All right—I'll put you out of your misery."

And patting them fondly on the backs, he led them, pausing only now and then to laugh uproariously, right to a private garage where he'd stored the "stolen car" on which he'd collected insurance.

It cleared up the stolen car mystery—but was also the start of something more important. For when the police examined the contents of the car they found some very strange things. Rope, for example and adhesive tape, and cotton, and ammonia, and a blanket.

That tied in with something else which had ben bothering them; all those objects might very well have some connection with the recent disappearance, just before Selz went to jail on the gas station robbery charge, of Mrs. Ada Rice, a woman with whom Selz had been living.

The police had been unable to work officially on the matter before this, because neighbors assured them that Mrs. Rice had gone away somewhere with a Bulgarian officer, one Michael Baronovich. (It later came out that they knew this because that nice young man who lived with Mrs. Rice had told them so.) But now the police began to question Selz.

Again he evaded their questions, laughing harder and harder as their anger grew. And they couldn't do a thing, because no corpse had been found.

FINALLY, two police officials took him for a drive, hoping they could get him to talk by employing suggestion. As they drove through a lonely road near Skyline Boulevard, alongside of which lay a shallow ditch, one of the officers remarked, "That would be a nice place to hide a body, wouldn't it?"

By a strange coincidence, the body of Mrs. Rice was buried right in that area;

any other killer would have remained silent and trembled in his boots. Not Selz.

"Say, do you get premonitions?" he asked. "You're getting a little too close to suit me." Each word was spaced with laughter.

Unfortunately, Skyline Boulevard is so long that his remark didn't help too much, but the police knew they were closer. They worked on Selz with renewed energy—battering questions at him, yelling and shouting at him for hours. And finally he gave way.

"All right," he said, finally. "I buried her, but Baronovich was really responsible." He told an interesting story of how he had come home one night and found the place dark, but two persons were there who immediately began to fight with him. He killed one, who turned out to be Mrs. Rice, and chased the other, Baronovich, away.

Eventually he took police to the shallow foxhole in which he had buried his late girl friend. Her body was considerably decomposed, and some of the accompanying reporters and police were sick, but Selz found it very funny.

"Wow!" he said, looking at the body. "She didn't look like that when I hung around with her."

He was then asked again about Baronovich, but waved that away. "Oh," he said, grinning, "I caught up with him later on and killed him, too, and tossed his body over the San Mateo bridge." It tickled him when the police issued orders to drag the river, because it became obvious before very long that there had never been a Michael Baronovich.

The police had turned up checks drawn on Mrs. Rice's bank account which had been forged by Selz, so possibly his motive was financial, but many persons familiar with the case continue to believe that Selz did the whole thing just for laughs. He was brought to court on March 12, 1936, still laughing, and in perhaps the shortest murder trial in United States history—fifty-five minutes—was sentenced to San Quentin for life.



SEARCH AND SEIZURE

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in the District Court on four counts charging violation of federal narcotic law. The District Court refused to suppress this evidence before trial and admitted it over defendant's objection at the trial. Conviction resulted and the Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the decision. The defendant challenged the search of her home as a violation of the rights secured to her, in common, with others, by the Fourth Amendment to the constitution. The government defended the search as legally justifiable, more particularly as incident to what it urged was a lawful arrest of the person.

THIS CASE went to the Supreme Court of the United States, and was decided on February 2, 1948 and in the records it is known as *Johnson v. The United States Of America.* In our country, which prides itself as being a bulwark of democracy, we are faced with a tough problem. How far can the government go in search and seizure? If necessary, would it be better to permit one who definitely has broken the law to escape, rather than to allow innocent people to be subjected to the whim of officers? Go back to the days when we were colonies of England. The practice had obtained in the colonies of issuing writs of assistance to the revenue officers, empowering them, in their discretion, to search suspected places for smuggled goods. James Otis pronounced this "the worst instrument of arbitrary power, the most destructive of English liberty, and the fundamental principles of law, that ever was found in an English law book." His reason was that it placed "the liberty of every man in the hands of every petty officer."

Let us look at the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States which provides: *"The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and ef-*

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fects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." In the case of *Weeks v. United States*, Mr. Justice Day, writing for the court. said, "The effect of the Fourth Amendment is to put the court of the United States and Federal officials, in the exercise of their power and authority, under limitations and restraints as to the exercise of such power and to forever secure the people, their persons, houses, papers and effects against all unreasonable searches and seizures under the guise of law. This protection reaches all alike, whether accused of crime or not, and the duty of giving to it force and effect is obligatory upon all entrusted under our Federal system with the enforcement of the laws. The tendencey of those who execute the criminal laws of the country to obtain conviction by means of unlawful seizures and enforced confessions....should find no sanction in the judgments of the courts which are charged at all times with the support of the Constitution and to which people of all conditions have a right to appeal for the maintenance of such fundamental rights."

WE WILL now go back to our main case and see what the court held in regard to the defendant's appeal. It pointed out that entry to defendant's living quarters, which was the beginning of the search was demanded under color of office. It was granted in submission to authority rather than as an understanding and intentional waiver of a constitutional right.

At the time entry was demanded the officers were possessed of evidence which a magistrate might have found to be probable cause for issuing a search warrant. If the presence

of odors is testified to before a magistrate and he finds the affiant qualified to know the odor, and it is one sufficiently distinctive to identify a forbidden substance, this is in itself a basis sufficient to justify the issuance of a search warrant. However, the government claimed that the search without a warrant was valid because it was incident to an arrest. To this contention the court pointed out that since there was no warrant, it could be valid only for a crime committed in the presence of the arresting officer or for a felony of which he had reasonable cause to believe the defendant guilty. Yet the situation boils down to this: Once the authorities got inside the room, it was their observation which led to the arrest of the defendant. On pure logic alone, you can't justify the arrest by the search and also justify the search by the arrest. An officer gaining access to private quarters under the color of his office and of the law which he personifies must have some valid basis in law for the intrusion. Any other rule in this country would undermine "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects" and would obliterate one of the most fundamental distinctions of our form of government.

The court said, "The point of the Fourth Amendment, which often is not grasped by zealous officers, is not that it denies law enforcement the support of the usual inferences which reasonable men draw from evidence. Its protection consists in requiring that those inferences be drawn by a neutral and detached magistrate instead of being judged by the officer engaged in the often competitive enterprise of ferreting out crime. Any assumption that evidence sufficient to support a magistrate's disinterested determination to issue a search warrant will justify the officers in making a search without a warrant would reduce the amendment to a nullity and leave the people's homes secure only in the discretion of police officers. Crime, even in the privacy of one's own quarters is, of course, of grave concern to society, and the law allows such crime to be reached on proper showing. The right of officers to thrust themselves into a home is also a grave concern, not only to the individual but to a society which chooses to dwell in reasonable security and freedom from surviellance. *When* the right of privacy must reasonably yield to the right of search is, as a rule, to be decided by a judicial officer, not by a policeman or government enforcement agent." And so the court reversed the decision of the lower court.

Crime is on the increase in this country and all law-abiding citizens want every measure taken not only to fight this menace but also to prevent it. However, every step must be within the framework of our laws. Respect for the law means not only that the citizens of this country live within the law, but also that our government is subjected to it. The late Justice Brandeis phrased it in these powerful words, "In a government of laws, existence of the government will be imperilled if it fails to observe the law scrupulously. Our Government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example. Crime is contagious. If the Government becomes a law-breaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites an anarchy."

Wise King Solomon is reputed to have said that it is better to permit ninty-nine guilty men to escape punishment rather than to punish one innocent man. We need not go so far, but we can say that it is better from time to time to permit a person who is obviously guilty of breaking the law to go unpunished than to permit the law itself to take steps which will undermine the safety of all the people. We are the last bulwark of Decency and Democracy in this world and the price is small we have to pay in order to live under the law and not under the whims of men.

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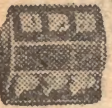
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